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# **Under the Yellow and Red Stars**

## **Alexander (Joshua) Levin**

“I want to write this book. Since you’ve decided  
to be faithful to your life, to the memory of it,  
don’t deviate from your chosen path.” Uriy Nagibin

### **Foreword**

*My senses have not left me. I can still see the war-ravaged faces of hate all around me. I can see the blood. I can smell the sickening pall of gun smoke rising toward the sky after having cracked the air with its evil. Blunt sticks are raised to the sky, held high in bloodied hands, before crashing down again. I hear the dogs baying with bared fangs, leaping toward the same indifferent sky, straining to break free of their chains and join in the carnage all around them. I hear the subdued murmur of confusion and fear followed by desperate shrieks of pain. Worse, I hear the final cries of death from innocent victims. I know these victims to be my friends; children who had months earlier played with me after school, neighbours who had borrowed and lent, teachers and rabbis who had taught us love and honour.*

*I feel my brother’s hand, trembling but strong, grab onto mine. I hear his words, urging me to run, take hold of my body and move my legs. We run, his hand holding mine with the strength of all the love and honour that had somehow managed to survive. I still imagine that it grasps mine as I write these words now. It has the strength of a thousand men, maybe 6 million men, but to me it feels like freedom. For the briefest second, we are victorious and I can savour the sweetness of escape. Then, nestled safely in the womb of scrub in the forest, I think of my mother and taste the nauseating acid of anger and irrevocable loss.*

*My senses have not left me.*

To write a book about the grandiose scale events of the past is a thankless if not impossible task. It’s hard not to sink in details, not to give way to emotions and succumb to illusions.

I got the urge to put my story on paper a long time ago and I have been jotting down every now and then, albeit with difficulty, separate episodes, but the main motivation for the actual book came from the words of the *International Prize* winner – Eli Wiesel: “Every person who was under the Nazi regime has a unique story. So write, write, write. We have to know! Maybe there will be one sentence, which will shed some kind of sombre light.”

I reached the conclusion that such books are extremely useful. Not only do they leave a truthful account of the past for the future generations, they also help the generations of the present and the future to adequately evaluate today’s life. I know that this will be a

testament of those who are alive for those who have been murdered. This will be a portrait of mankind against the background of a millennium winding down. In this book I tried to tell a story of an ordinary Jewish family, caught up in the events of World War II and the Holocaust. This is a story of brothers, who have survived but were separated for more than 30 years. It is about their reunion in Canada.

My goal is to tell a story of survival despite mighty cruel forces that were aimed against us.

How we escaped the executions.

How we wandered, homeless, from one village to the next, from one settlement to the other?

Where we found food in a wilderness environment.

What relationship existed between us and the locals?

How is it possible that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century two children could live, primitively and in isolation in the forest for nearly a year and a half, persecuted by a merciless enemy for death, and still survive?

And, inevitably, how was it possible to survive Stalin's dictatorial regime?

More than half a century has passed. Human nature is such that with age our memory begins to fail us. The world of the past is fading rapidly and soon will be buried in the annals of history. I have to find strength within me to live through the pain once again. The pain, which is hard to talk about, is even more so to write. This pain has penetrated my flesh and blood. It is something I've always felt and still experience daily. These are the memories of the pain endured through the pogroms, the executions, the hungry and cold childhood, the feelings of constant loss, the death of relatives and friends. These memories are hard to fit into several easy phrases.

"Memory is a ball of yarn. Tug at the thread and it begins to unwind. But the threads of memory tear, bundle up, intertwine. It takes time to get it all in order."

I remember only certain details, facts, which pulsate in my memory. All my life I tried to forget the past. Anger would boil inside of me whenever the painful questions of the past arose. I always felt the futility of trying to explain to anyone what happened, because they hadn't experienced those horrors firsthand and were unlikely to comprehend the depth of my emotions. One might ask why do I still believe in human kindness after all that I've been through? The Holocaust survivors revitalize history by being alive. But for a long time the Holocaust itself was not fully reflected in history because of the silence of the survivors. We were silent because we couldn't talk about it yet. We were too close to the actual events, our wounds were still fresh.

All our energy was aimed toward the future. But perhaps the most important reason for our silence was the fact that we understood that no one was ready to really listen to us.

Years went by fast. Now, looking back I try to analyze what my childhood was actually like in the shtetl (small Jewish town) of Rokitno, what my adolescence was like during the war years, my youth as a cadet of the Suvorov Military School and I always say it was happy and unhappy at the same time. Unhappiness was brought about by the fascism and the Soviet dictatorship. Happiness came from the kind people I met on my hard life's path and my friends at the Suvorov Military School.

My generation is the last generation to have known personally those who risked their lives to fight against the horrors of the Holocaust. It is our solemn responsibility to pass

this knowledge to our children and grandchildren. The period of silence is over and we have to make sure that something like this can never happen again. The world has to know what exactly was happening during those dark times in order prevent it from happening again. We have to bring up the young generations in freedom to save them from having to go through what our generation has gone through.

We have to teach the youth of today the values of human unity and soulful brotherhood. We have to convince them that by unconditionally treating others well, one becomes richer and more beautiful.

“Only if we remember our past, we will be able to live in the present and hope to build a new tomorrow.” These are the words of Martin Borman, the son of the most barbarian fascist. We must live with all the energy and conviction of a bright future.

# **Under the Yellow and Red Stars**

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### **Chapter One: In the Shtetl, Rokitno**

“Beware not to forget what your eyes have seen and tell it to your children and your children’s children.” *Biblical reference 4:9*

The early decades of the Twentieth Century found Jews spread out all over Western and Eastern Europe. Their presence reached back for centuries before that. In some cases they had been assimilated into the fabric of local populations, but mostly they had settled in pockets of their own, establishing themselves in both major cities and small, sometimes tiny, communities. There were reasons why the Jews escaped complete assimilation in Europe. The rationale has its roots hundreds of years before when the rabbis established guidelines for the people to follow. These guidelines promoted not only the self-

sufficiency of the Hebrew people but also their very survival in what became known as the Diaspora.

When they were cast out of their homeland by the Romans in about 70 A.D. and began their exile they were compelled by social, political and racial elements to spread out over the continent in small groups rather than to remain physically as a nation. They established themselves in cities, towns and villages. But it would have been impossible to retain the independence and integrity of vastly dispersed communities, where they could so easily lose their identity and possibly even forget about the meaning of their religion and the promise to G-d. So steps were taken to try to ensure the survival not only of the Jewish people as a nation but also of the Torah, the teachings of the scholars and the purpose of their pledge; to uphold the centre of civilization through the practise of their faith.

In order to accomplish this difficult task the sages placed, at the very centre of Jewish life, a part of the community that was initially a replication of the Temple in Jerusalem which had held spiritual, moral and physical power. They replicated this force for unity as the synagogue, each one with its own Torah scroll, each one with it's own eternal flame, each one with its own Rabbi and each one with it's own congregation. Since they couldn't travel far on the Sabbath the people had to live close to the synagogue and since their food had to be kosher they had to live in definable communities. This was not only a convenience. It was a choice and a way of life. With these small communities in both the cities and the countryside the Jews had a defence against assimilation. They also, over time, developed a culture and a social fabric, so that they existed very much like an independent people among the various nations of Europe. Although the Jews were known all over the vast lands, they were not always favoured. For one thing, they were different. They had different social manners. They had their own parts of city or town. They wouldn't eat your food or come into your home. They often even spoke a different language. The aspects so crucial to their survival were, indeed, the very things that caused them to be segregated and often persecuted. The concern that they practised a religion that was different to the other European peoples was deeply felt, but the fact that these people, the Jews, had risen to some heights of wealth and power was a blinding insult. To the people of Europe the Jews became an alien group who appeared at one and the same time to turn away from them but gather their own wealth and power.

By the 1930's the intense fire of this perception of the Jews, though misguided, was fanned unscrupulously. Although the Jews did exist, in some sense, as a culture within cultures, they had also become integrated as a group into the weave of life across Europe. At least, that's what we thought. There were conflicts on the local level, of course, but they were usually small and petty and could easily be resolved. Or so we thought. I was born in a town in Poland. I was a young boy when World War II began.

The part of every European town or village that was home to the Jews was called a shtetl. The Polish village I grew up in was called Rokitno, and the part I lived in, the Shtetl, was a part of the larger settlement. Although it was a poor and simple place it was set in majestic and beautiful surroundings. There was a tiny river, which was a popular spot with the young people. There were wells with unforgettable pure, cold water. There was a park, and at one with that cultured environment there was even an old castle, surrounded by huge oaks. And of course, surrounding the village as both a barrier and a resource

there was the lush, thick, overgrown old forest. That was, by far, the most important feature of the locale.

The history of the settlement was larger in scale than the village itself might have suggested. The first settlers in the shtetl Rokitno were the Jews from the nearby village of the same name. Among these first settlers was my grandfather Sheptl Levin. Jewish history in Poland dates back thousands of years. Early pioneers were mostly dependant on the local farmers who sold them the surplus grain. Also, the local blacksmiths would shoe their horses, and other important services were exchanged.

Despite mutual benefits, the relationship between the Jews and the locals was tense. In more current times, an active part of the Jewish population (with the exception of a small minority) participated in the political life of Poland through various Jewish religious organizations and the Zionist organization *Beitar*. The Jewish community tried to bring up the youth with love of the Jewish culture; they were taught Yiddish and Ancient Jewish languages, for example. Many individuals were also preparing to move to Palestine for good. When my brothers and I were small, as young *Beitar* members, we used to go to the outskirts of the town and sing songs in Hebrew alongside older *Beitar* members as well as members called *Haluzim* who actually came from Palestine. “*Anu olim Artza, bei shira vei bzimra...*” (We are living to Israel, with songs and happiness).

These words and this particular dream of a life in Palestine were with us throughout our whole life. The songs of the *Beitar*, the joy of friendship and the promise of uniting together in a homeland lingered in our hearts and minds. These times were magical, perhaps because I was so young and the poignant fantasy of a far away, almost mystical land was enthralling. Perhaps because words of the songs were sometimes exotic and mysterious. But, most of all, I remember the feeling of being with a group of friends who shared something common; a goal, a future.

It was Jewish businessmen who brought prosperity to this little town. The sand rich in silicone allowed for the establishment of a glass factory, which meant jobs for the local Poles and Ukrainians. The Rokitno Glass Factory was built around 1899 by a Belgian Jew named Rosenberg. It became the monopoly supplier of bottles for the state vodka factories. Rokitno was chosen as a site for the glass factory not by chance, but for economic reasons. The massive forest surrounding the location provided cheap wood for fuel and the fact that this area was considered to be the middle of nowhere at that time allowed for cheap labour. The factory was built with a projected output capacity of about 12 million 0.5 litre bottles a year. It was a huge enterprise in those days. Only the Konstantinovsk Glass factory was larger than Rokitno, producing up to 20 million bottles a year.

According to the locals who worked at the factory during that period of Polish history, Rosenberg owned the factory till the October Socialist revolution of 1917. From 1921 to 1922 the factory was owned the by a retired Polish general, Zavadski, and his relative Leschinski, but the business went bankrupt and was acquired by the “Vitrum” company owned by Franzleich and Ronglevski. They owned the factory till 1939. It still functions today, but as a joint stock company.

The woods surrounding the shtetl played a major role in the life of the Jewish community. It was a source of the raw material for the local woodcutting shop. It also

served as a gathering place for the *Beitar* organized meetings. The woods around Rokitno were famous for its thousand years old oaks and generous harvests of white mushrooms and various berries. This area was a jewel of Polesje, the Woodland region. The mushrooms were dried, sorted and sold by the Jewish entrepreneurs to travelling salesmen. At our house we even had a special guest room for the itinerant salesmen in our town. My mother cooked for them, which also served as a supplement to our family income. I remember my mother sending my older brother out to the train station to try and get the travelling salesmen to board with us for the night.

Our house was just like the majority of the houses in the town. It was fairly large, with a vegetable garden and a separate tool shed. Most Jewish families had domestic animals such as cows, chickens, geese and ducks. They also grew their own vegetables. If anything else was needed, it was bought at the market. Our town was also famous for a volunteer fire brigade ([see photo](#)), which consisted of both the Poles and the Jews. Fires were a great danger to our town as most houses were wooden with straw roofs. The town was also famous for its pharmacy run by the Soltzman family. People used to travel from distant villages to buy medicine prescribed by our doctor, Anischuk.

The population of the town in 1939 was about 8500. More than half of those were Poles, Catholic and Orthodox Ukrainians, then followed the Jews, the Russians, the Belorussians, and the gypsies, albeit they were always in passing. The Jewish community revolved around two synagogues. The older children attended the Jewish school and the pre-schoolers attended *Heder*. The language of instruction was Hebrew, but Polish language and literature were mandatory subjects. I still remember this Polish poem by Adam Mitzkiewich: “*Zimno, zimno, mruz na dvozhe, yak do pieza dzev nalozhim, bendze teplo i milutko, bendze, bendze, ale krutko.*” (Cold,cold,frost on the street,when will put wood to the oven, will be worm and pleasant, but for a short time).

About 3000 Jews populated Rokitno and surrounding areas ([see a map](#)). One couldn't call them rich; even so, they maintained their traditions till the day the German occupation of Poland began on September 1, 1939. The Soviet Union also got a piece of the country as a result of the famous pact signed by Hitler, Ribbentrop and Stalin, Molotov. In a strategic move Hitler neutralized the Soviet Union with that non-aggression agreement, which also divided Poland. The two dictators accused each other of fascism and communism, respectively. That same September, the Red Army entered Rokitno without any resistance from the Polish troops at the border. I especially remember the Red horsemen with hats baring a big [red star](#). Some called the fact that the Soviet border moved westward “a reunion,” some called it “liberation,” and some called it “occupation.” That's how our little shtetl got new Russian citizenship.

The day they arrived, many Jews filled the streets greeting the Soviet troops and we, the poor children, begged the soldiers for tobacco or gathered cigarette butts in hopes of making new cigarettes and selling them back to the soldiers.

The Communist Party had outlawed religion. It was supposed to be replaced by politics and love of the State. Consequently, the Soviet government closed the Jewish school “*Tarbut*,” the synagogues, outlawed the Zionist clubs and outlawed all religious activities. The Jewish children were reassigned to a Ukrainian school where they had to learn Ukrainian and Russian, and study the Soviet doctrine.

The Jews who were considered rich (such as Shulman, Gitelman, the three Golubovich brothers who owned the woodcutting shop) lost everything. But the Soviets couldn't complete their plans for the assimilation of the Jews, because Hitler turned his weapons to the east and the lives of the Ukrainians, the Poles, the Russians and the Jews were never the same.

Our house was at 11 *Pilsudski* Street, which was named after the leader of Poland from 1918-1935. ([See photo](#)) When the Red army arrived it was renamed Stalin Street. It was in the old part of the town, populated predominantly by the Jews. Rokitno was also a town full of mud year round and the rainwater always flooded the streets since there was no sewage system. But for us, the boys, this also was an invitation to play. We navigated little handmade boats in the puddles. Perhaps if I had grown up in the village I would have learned to like the mud somewhat less, but to a healthy child there is nothing but play. The mud wasn't the only source of happiness in Rokitno. There was also a colourful Sunday bazaar in the centre of the new part of town and hundreds of peasants came there every Sunday. ([See photo](#)) The peasants, dressed in their best clothes, walked or rode horse carts flooding the streets. They usually carried their goods in willow baskets. The trading happened all over the bazaar square as well as in little shops owned by the Jews. There was so much noise and activity that the market square looked like a boiling sea. Our house also had a manufacturing shop attached to it. The Haichkes family, who rented half the house from us, owned the shop. I remember waiting for Sunday to arrive with such anticipation, eager to make a little money for candy or ice cream. I was paid to hang around the shop and watch the visitors making sure they didn't steal anything.

**My childhood memories** have preserved our family in a strong, happy, enduring vision. My mother was the image of a Jewish mother with her everyday, homey routines. My father was always concerned for our well-being and our future. My brothers studied and worked a little here and there.

**Natan** was a jovial boy who loved to play physical games and he often came home very dirty. But his main passion was for the doves. He kept them in a specially constructed place next to the tool shed. To feed and clean them he had to climb up on its roof. He let his doves out daily and loved to watch them fly, enjoying how high they could go. You could find Natan almost anytime, a silhouette against the bank of cages. Sometimes he would attract other boys' doves and hold them for a small ransom. He used to hit me on the back of my head if he caught me climbing up there to see how the little doves grew. I wasn't allowed there alone. But he did teach me how to distinguish the doves' gender. I wasn't terribly interested in gender at that time, but the ability to distinguish the girl doves from the boy doves gave me an insight I hadn't had before.

**Samuel** was rather different from us. He showed signs of becoming a businessman very early on. But he also liked music and pursued it to the extent that was possible in our town. Since we didn't have a violin in our house, he used the school violin to learn how to play. Samuel put on theatrical productions in our tool shed. He charged other kids admission and they paid with buttons, which he sold at the market, or pieces of broken glass, which he collected and later sold to the glass factory. Sometimes they paid with small stones, which he put into piles in our backyard and later also sold. He also liked soccer. All games were held in the big green meadow not far from the famous old castle. Sometimes we played the Jews versus the Poles.

Because I was younger, I liked different games. For example, I had a huge metal ring that once held together a barrel and I used to push it around and chase it, navigating it with a small metal rod. I also made slings to shoot stones at birds. I also recall playing by the old synagogue. There was a big pear tree there and we used to pick pears and hide them in piles of hay to make them ripen faster. Sometimes they'd begin to rot, but for us, children, they were still a delicious treat.

It's understood that not every child has a good, safe childhood. I acknowledge that I was blessed, because those essential formative years were rich with positive and healthy memories and experiences. Rokitno was not a lavish environment but even the mud was fun for me. We weren't a wealthy family, but we were strong and loving. Because of that, perhaps mostly because of that, I am alive today. Looking back, childhood and adolescence seemed wonderful. A person has only one childhood and adolescence. They're irreversible and irretrievable. And even though there was hunger, frost and poverty, memory erases everything bad as the years ago by. Memory preserves only good things. They are the only things worth preserving.

I remember the days when I used to walk to *Heder* or when I visited the synagogue with my father and couldn't wait for the prayers to end so I could rush home to taste all that my mother had just cooked. I recall the sweet moments when the whole family used to gather at the oval Saturday dinner table. My mother was a good cook and she enjoyed doing it. I still remember the smell and the taste of her meals. How can it be possible to forget her bean soup, *chovnt*, and then the fruit compote?

I remember the days when I spend time with my grandparents, uncles and aunts in the village of Kupichev, Kovel region of Volyn. ([see photo](#)). In front of me is the shed, where the grandchildren lined up to have a worm glass of milk and a fresh egg and only than we got permission to go to the garden picking up cherries.

There was no shame or fear in being a Jewish boy at that time. We were a part of Polish society although there was certainly anti-Antisemitism all around. We knew that. It wasn't masked and it wasn't always visible and even at that very young age I knew the idea that "in every age they rise against us". I know now that Rokitno was not paradise, but it was home. I don't actually know why that means so much, but it does. In the hundreds, perhaps thousands of shtetls across Europe the same feelings were true. We were part of our families, part of our communities, part of the life around us. We didn't expect to be murdered.

## **Chapter Two: The Massacre of Rokitno and Our Flight**

On June 22, 1941 the first German air bomb hit the Rokitno train station. World War II had taken a new and destructive turn against Russian forces in Poland. The fascists supported by the Ukrainian nationalists launched a blitzkrieg, and within a short time it proved effective. The Soviet armed forces retreated in chaos. In a flight of panic the town officials caught last trains out. Those who could afford a horse cart packed them with their belongings and headed out. The rest of the people headed east on foot. The trains were overcrowded with civilians, soldiers, animals and luggage. It was complete chaos. One day, soon after the bombing began, my oldest brother, Nathan, came to our house with a horse cart loaded with bread and flour. He tried to convince my father that our whole family should follow him and many others to Russia.

“The people who are coming want only to kill you, Father.” He said with passion. “They will kill every Jewish man, woman and child!”

My father looked at my little brother, Moishe. “They won’t kill us!” he replied evenly. “They will only keep us in one place, away from the war.”

My brother could not believe my father was so naive. “Can’t you see they are murderers!”

“They will not kill us.” My father repeated, simply but steadfastly.

“You have heard the stories from the west? You have heard about extermination.”

“I don’t believe the stories. They are an exaggeration. I don’t believe it would be better to flee. This is our home.”

Natan was resolute. “This is not home, Father. No one wants us to be here. Already some of the people in the village are talking about killing us, talking about hateful acts. Come, pack your things! Come with me to the Russian front, before its too late.”

My father’s eyes turned very sad. “You go, Natan. You are young and you can do what you think is best. Your mother and I and the boys will stay here. Here is where it is most safe for us.”

Our father, as well as many other elders, thought that the Germans wouldn’t hurt the Jewish communities based on their experience of the First World War. Such denial was, in retrospect, completely misguided. It was incompatible with the first hand witness accounts of refugees, who were running from the unspeakable acts of cruelty committed by the Nazis and their local communities. Nathan decided without hesitation to immediately head east with our cousins, despite our father’s disapproval and the constant air raids. It was the last time any of us saw Natan until many years after the war. His

story is a story of struggle for survival, of seeking reunion with Samuel and, eventually, myself. It's a special chapter in our family history.

The rapid withdrawal of the Soviet troops created a legal and political void, and the wave of anti-Antisemitism rose again in our "little paradise." Violence ensued. The Poles and the Ukrainians broke into the Jewish homes and robbed them of everything that was of any value. The violence escalated. During the first pogrom a resident of the shtetl, Avraham Golod, was stoned to death. Then the men of the community decided to patrol the community at night armed with axes, shovels and pitchforks.

There was a brief period of calm, but it was shattered a week later when the Germans entered the town. The Poles and the Ukrainians greeted them with ceremonial bread and salt. The Germans introduced their own laws. They organized police and put Sokolovski, a half-Pole, half-German from Silesia, in charge. The administrative department was assigned to Dich. Denes became a commandant of the *Ukrainische Gilfpolizei*.

Zagorovski headed the Rokitno Ukrainian department. Within a few days "*Judenrat*" – the Jewish community assembly – was created to implement the town commandant's rules. This organization was assigned the responsibility of implementing the vicious and binding orders of the Nazis. The first regulations to be introduced were:

- creation of the Jewish ghetto on Stalin street
- all Jews age 10 and up were required to wear special patches – two yellow circles, 10 centimetres in diameter with a Star of David in the middle. One was to be worn on the chest, another one on the back
- to be in public spaces without these patches was prohibited
- walking on sidewalks was prohibited for the Jews
- leaving the ghetto without special permission was not allowed
- those who dared to leave the ghetto, contact the locals, and exchange their belongings for food were sentence to immediate execution by shooting

Desperate and terrible times started right away. One terrible order followed another. One of the first things we were made to do was to make uniforms for the Ukrainian policemen. Their uniforms were made of out of black gabardine and if there wasn't enough material provided we had to cut and use our own holiday clothing for sewing. It was at that time that I first saw the Ukrainian Trident – a symbol of Ukrainian nationalism. Those Ukrainians who supported the Nazis in hopes of creating a Sovereign Ukraine wore it. There were many committed supporters of Nazism in Ukraine.

Ukrainian anti-Antisemitism has an almost 300 year long history – including the memorable 1632 massacres in Gaidamak and Nemirov. The 20<sup>th</sup> century offered new opportunities for persecution.

Another order demanded, under the threat of death, to turn in all gold, silver, and furs, as well as cows and any other animals. More than 30 kilograms of gold was turned in to the Germans as a result of this command. Every new order brought further starvation and sickness to the ghetto. Each day was filled with fear and uncertainty. The food was running out in the ghetto and people were starting to die of starvation. Risking life, I managed to sneak out of the ghetto every now and then and exchange some of our belongings for bread and eggs. This was a dangerous transaction for both me and my partners. We lived in constant fear, hunger and the anticipation of death. Every day the

Jews had to report to the police station to be assigned to various projects. Men did repairs of the railroad tracks and roads and worked at the woodcutting shop. Women harvested. Children ages 10 to 14 were made to work at the glass factory. ([See photo.](#)) There was no pay for any of this work. At best, we were given 100 grams of bread per day.

My brother Samuel worked for the German officers at *Tod organization*. He had to shine their boots, split firewood, help their Polish chef cook and serve the meals to the officers. Every now and then he'd sneak an opportunity to eat himself, and sometimes he was allowed to take home some food scraps and leftovers which had gone bad. Our mom re-cooked them into meals adding oats and wild goose foot. *Samuel* later recalled often being beaten and humiliated by the Polish chef.

One day my brother was polishing boots of a German officer named Lemel and the officer told him, "If we start killing the Jews, boy, come here and we won't kill you." *Samuel* realized what was in store for the Jewish community and reported the remark to the *Judenrat*, where it was ignored.

Every day spent in the ghetto was filled with nightmares. People were constantly dying of starvation and sicknesses. Private food reserves and vegetables from the gardens were running out and it was getting harder and harder to get food from the locals. We, the children, managed sometimes to sneak out of the ghetto and exchange some clothes for a handful of flour or a piece of bread, but this was a very dangerous mission for all those involved. In compliance with "the new order," the Nazis, aided by the *Ukrainische Gilfspolizei* (Ukrainian Supplementary Police force) and the *Judenrat* officials, implemented the twice a day headcount to keep everyone in the ghetto under control and in constant fear. The headcount occurred in the bazaar square in the new part of town. The commandant did roster call and then everyone headed back into the ghetto. The children and the sick were exempt from these daily headcount.

The horrors came to a deadly resolution on August 26, 1942. That day the whole Jewish population of the town was ordered into the bazaar square. No one was exempt now, including infants, the gravely ill, and the elders. Those who couldn't walk were carried to the square on stretchers. Some people carried others on their backs. The German soldiers and the police surrounded the square. They began their "work" by separating children, women, men, and the elderly. The situation developed into fear and disorder. Soon, deafening screaming and moaning filled the square. People panicked. Children were clinging to their mothers. Everyone was trying to defend the old and the sick. All of a sudden, a sharp scream pierced the air:

"Jews, they're going to kill us all now." Mindl Eisenberg, a big, tall, brave woman nicknamed "The Cossack," saw the police escadrille arrive from behind the train station and alerted the crowd. Anguished, people began to run for their life. Men ran to find their wives and children. Everyone was trying to escape. Only bullets could stop them. The guards fired at the crowd and dozens of people were killed instantaneously, covering the square with blood. In this hell, my 17 year old brother Samuel found me, grabbed me by the arm and we started running...

That was the last time we saw our mother, father and our 5 years old brother Moses. Later we found out that our father was captured and taken to the *Sarny* area, some 60 kilometres from Rokitno, where he was shot down in the ravines by the brick factory along with some 18,000 Jews who met their horrifying deaths in that awful place ([see](#)

[photo](#)). Witness accounts of the massacre say that the ground, which covered hundreds of bodies, was moving for days, because some people were buried alive. We never found out about the fate of our mother and our youngest brother.

My brother and I ran away from the bazaar square. We ran to the house of the German officer who promised Samuel to save him. We broke into the house through the back window, but unhappily ran into the Polish chef. Without hesitation, my brother took me by the hand and ran for the backyard door, through the yard toward the woods. We crawled underneath the rail cars, prepared for transporting the Jews to the *Sarny* area, and escaped into the forest. We ran fast, and kept on running.

We managed to escape Rokitno. We didn't know where to go at first, but we wanted to get as far away from that murderous place as possible. The forest was dense and thick and frightening in itself for two boys already deeply traumatized, but there was soon some relief. In the woods we ran into other escapees. At first, we met one, then a few more until there were a significant number of us together in the woods. The adults talked to each other in whispers. "Where is your family?" one woman asked.

Sam shook his head. "I don't know. Back there, in the village. We had to run."

"We can't go back, not for any reason. They are killing everybody, women and children." One woman had two children with her. "My husband fell behind me. He was shot. I couldn't go back because of the children. What are we supposed to do?"

There were brief stories of anguish and fear. "They will come after us, too!" someone said.

There was hurried discussion among the adults. Finally, they agreed. "We are in more danger if we all stay together. Let's break up into small bands. That way it will be harder to find us." One woman suggested we all travel together in small groups. In this way Samuel and I moved toward the villages of *Netreba* and *Okopy*. The woods in that area were denser and there were swamps, which provided a better hideout. I remember being told,

"Do not go into any villages, except in the case of extreme emergency and even then stay as close to the woods as possible. You could run into the police in the villages.", but even the locals sometimes greeted the Jews with axes and pitchforks.

The road was very hard and dangerous, but there were some memorable acts of kindness and courage that stand out. Two names are forever etched into my heart: Ludwik Wrodarchuk, a *ksendz* (*Catholic priest*), and a Polish teacher from *Okopy*, Felicia Masojada. They hid us in their house, in the wardrobe closet, after the first raid in Rokitno and provided us with some clothes and food to last a short while. Later we found out that these wonderful people, true good souls, paid a high price for their compassion. They were executed by the Nazis collaborators. Many witnesses have since written about the life of these remarkable people, including such accounts as "There Were Three of Them" by Janik Bronislaw, a retired Polish army colonel, and "My Volynski Epos" by Leon Zhur. Their courage and commitment to humanity are an example on which to bring up the young generations. In 2000, these two individuals were declared "Righteous Among The Nations" by the Jewish agency Yad Vashem. ([See photo](#)).

## **Chapter Three: We Take Shelter in the Forest**

It did not take long before the locals refused to hide any of us anymore. It was too dangerous for them. Lost and without a place to go, no longer in small groups in the woods, we decided to return to Rokitno. On the way back, through the trees of the forest we saw many people looting the empty Jewish houses, searching for anything valuable that could have possibly been left behind. They axed through the walls looking for hidden gold and money. These gangs didn't stand up for the Jews, didn't try to help them. They robbed them after their cruel deaths and hapless misfortune. The evil is easier to remember than the good. Victor Polischuk writes in his book 'Bitter Truth': "I'm ashamed of what my fellow countrymen did during the war. I'm ashamed of those who led the Jews to their deaths. I knew them. I still know them, these nationalists. I saw them kill. I know what they're capable of."

At some point we ran into a small caravan of horse carts. The people saw us, two frightened little boys, and called us over. When they found out we were Jewish and were heading back to Rokitno, they said in Ukrainian:

"Boys, what are you talking about? You have to run deep into the woods, because the Germans are still killing all the Jews."

This chance encounter triggered in us a desire to survive and we escaped back deep into the woods. Along the way we ran into many other Jewish escapees and refugees. But we remembered to stay in very small groups. Every night, after dark, we crawled cautiously into piles of hay in the fields, dug ourselves deep into the hay, masking so that only a small breathing hole would be open. Sometimes we secretly spent nights in tool sheds. No matter what the circumstances, we were always terrified that we might be caught. During our Odyssey we ended up staying for a while at a farm of a Polish peasant. He fed us and in return we had to work for him. Samuel was assigned to do various household tasks. From 4 a.m. till late night I had to tend to the cattle, grazing in the woods. There were eleven cows. Afraid that the Germans, the gangs of outlaws, or the Red partisans would take away his cows, the peasant would give me a slice of bread and some lard and ask me to take the cows deep into the woods. Later on, the cows were hidden in the forest in makeshift shacks. The woods had their own complicated underground life. There were also gangs of Ukrainian bandits who hated the Germans, the Soviets, and the Jews.

We didn't stay at this Polish peasant's farm for long.

My brother and I decided to look for partisans because we knew there were some partisans set up by the communists, others by the Poles, and still others by the Ukrainians who had their own horses and uniforms with a special emblem. Finally we found a village where the partisans were. They wanted Samuel but they didn't want me, so we didn't join them. We were mainly in the Polish villages because they were more generous. The Ukrainian Nationalists were fighting against the Russians. They were fighting for the Germans for national independence and they were against the Jews. We continued our journey through the woods in searching. At first, for the Soviet partisans (guerrilla fighters). And we found them. But they didn't want to hide Jews. At

that point we were near a village of *Karpilovka*. The partisans warned us that the villagers recently killed a couple of Jewish boys with axes. That made us seek further refuge in the area of the villages of *Netreba* and *Okopy*, which were populated primarily by the Poles, who were persecuted by the Ukrainian nationalists.

One night we saw a small campfire in the woods. Carefully we approached it and saw a group of Jews. It turned out to be Rahel Wasserman, her sister Dosya. There we also met Dvosl with a son and a daughter, Shmuel Bagel, Avraham Eisenberg, and Todres Linn. Our quiet reunion was brief. That night we were awaked by noise and saw three armed men in front of us. They introduced themselves as partisans, gave us food and left. The next night they came back and said they could take one woman to help them out. Dosya volunteered. We were deceived. Shortly thereafter we found out that they were, in fact, bandits. We never learned what happened to Dosya.

Death was just one real part of our life in the forest. We personally buried two people. The first one was Dvosl, who leaned on my brother's shoulder to sleep one night and by morning froze to death. Soon, her daughter died, too. Their bodies were grey and swollen. We buried them without any real ceremony because we were on the run and still, essentially, in a state of shock.

For a young boy the close experience of these deaths was hard to comprehend fully, but the tragedy and seriousness of it was clear. I was more than frightened. I was dumbstruck and remained silent in its wake.

Now we knew better how desperate our circumstances were. We could not go back to any civilized place and it was so cold that we suffered under the immediate and real threat of freezing to death. We were frightened and desperate, and yet within each of us was a flicker of purpose, a determination to survive whatever might come. Motivated by fierce emotions we were unable to comprehend we went deeper into the woods. I don't remember how it happened, who might have led us or made the decisions, but we started to work together. If that hadn't happened it would have been almost sure that Samuel and I would have died. I don't remember making plans, but we began to make a shelter in the deep middle of the woods, far from the perimeter where it might be found. It was a crude dugout which was to be shared by ten people. This ramshackle structure was made by both adults and children; in this situation each age had its own virtues. We began by digging a deep hole in the soil. This was reinforced by placing wood and bark around the sides and edges. On top of the deep hole, which we came to call 'the cave', we piled branches and sticks as a roof and as camouflage to both protect and enlarge it. We were careful to make the cave look like a natural occurring outcrop of bushes. Around the sides of the dugout were 'bunk beds' for sleeping and we built a simple but effective fireplace in the centre with space above it in our hiding place to allow the smoke to escape. The only wood we burned was oak, since it gave off little smoke; the forest was very rich in old oak. We collected it easily. We dug a small well to provide us with pure water.

My brother and I lived there with Haim Svechnik, his mother and sister, Rahel Wasserman and her two daughters, Bluma and Taibele, and Gitl Gamulka with her son Leva. We became "the forest Jews.". It was an affectionate name, something that gave us a feeling of family and togetherness. This dugout became our home and we masked it as well as we could, so the enemy couldn't find it. Sometimes it was hard even for us to find

it when we were returning after looking for food. An unusual oak with a particularly bent branch served as the only marker of the dugout.

Our days passed with difficulty, mostly out of fear of being caught but also, most immediate, out of the ever present reality of hunger. Even in this seeming chaos there was a sense of routine. Often, we would approach the outskirts of a village. We would see one light in a window and we would go and beg for food. We never went into the middle of a village. A typical day centred around getting food and not getting caught. We were always looking for ways to fill our tummy. We looked out for police, horses or Germans. Sometimes we'd see tire tracks from a car. Sometimes we were looking for metal cans to use to hold fire to scare away the wolves. The scream of an owl is like a human scream, and it also pursued us. For us as children it was very scary. Under less desperate circumstances living in the woods might have been something like an adventure; there was no sense of adventure in any of this for us. We had lost our parents and hunger, death, murder followed us all the time. We had to find wood, some mushrooms, whatever food we could.. There were no newspapers, no electricity, no radio or information. Day by day it went like this. Where there was wood there were snakes. We had to go farther and farther away to find what we needed.

To get caught, that was our first fear. We tried to get beets, turnips, potatoes. In winter we had to dig though the frozen ground. We were very innocent, we only wanted to survive. Because our intention was pure and simple we felt no guilt. We learned to identify mushrooms and berries, which people described for us as being poisonous or good. We made cups out of birch bark to catch the sap. We always had to find food. There was never enough food.

As time went by our situation improved to a degree. Although our life still was fraught with danger and hunger we got used to surviving in the forest. It became more and more our home, and conditions got better as time passed. After a year we were strengthened because, despite the odds, we were not caught. We became more secure and hopeful, but tragedy was still a daily threat.

In the fall of 1942 death came for Haim's mother and his sister. They both died of malnutrition and hypothermia. Their bodies were bloated, skin cracked. These nightmarish images still haunt me.

Seeing these members of our group perish slowly was a very deep thing for a little boy of ten years old. A child may not have a mature understanding of G-d. He may only understand that there is a benevolent being who makes things happen. But a child knows good and evil in a simple way. Without knowing it, the possibility of a force of good in and of itself faded away for me. In the way a child can, the belief in a protecting creator, in the G-d I had been taught about as a Jewish child, burst like a toy balloon, although the idea that I was a Jew remained very real. A little boy has a need to place order and purpose in something. For me, it became 'the woods'. The woods gave us what we needed, gave life and took it away.

The woods saved us. The woods, with their the fertile soil of Polesje, were remarkable. The thousand years old oaks intertwined with the hundred years old pines. We sought protection in these woods. They were our refuge and our hearth. Every tree became a fortress. Every shrub was a fort. The forest became our best friend. It's sad that I am not a

poet or a songwriter to adequately praise these woods, my saviour, and my faithful benefactor.

“Everything passes – and childhood, and the fairytales of the woods... Everything passes, alas, and only the grey wolves – oh, ever so immortal – greet us along the way.” These words of the poet *Naum Sagalovski* describe our life and struggle then.

We, the forest wanderers, who survived the fascist plague there, can tell many stories... The most important thing is that we, two orphans, adapted to the wild life and survived in the woods. We learned from the wild boars how to steal potatoes without getting noticed by the local peasants. We ate a lot of white beets and turnips, which grew in the fields to be fed to the barn animals. We used to dig them up from the ground or steal them from the storage sheds in the fields.

Perhaps one of the most vivid memories was among the most fearful. The wolves. Even today we remember the glittering eyes of the wolves, which followed us looking for prey. We remember frequent encounters with the foxes, and the swamp snakes when we went collecting tall rod to make moccasins. We remember the owl cries, which used to terrify us at night. These were nearly mystical because they were ever present but, in a sense, invisible.

Not so, the very real plague that hurt us so! How is it possible to forget the terrible and incessant lice! The lice were large and insatiable. We had them not only in our hair, but under our armpits and in our groin; they were crawling everywhere. The worst thing about it was the insatiable itching, which kept us awake at night. The forest taught us how to get rid of them. We used to strip naked and bury our clothes in the anthills. The ants ate the lice and their nits.

We could rarely avoid the awful rash that spread from between the toes all over the body: arms, legs, chest, even buttocks.

We became extremely resourceful and clever in the woods. Survival, even for two young boys, was not a game, but rather an earnest pursuit. We learned how to make moccasins out of bark from rods. We even weaved moccasin soles out of oak bark, which we steamed over the fire. Instead of socks we used to wrap our feet in sacks that the peasants used to separate the buttermilk from sour clotted milk to make cottage cheese. We stole these sacks during our nightly missions.

And in wintertime we wrapped our feet in *volosin* (*soft dry grass*), which was a very thin but warm material made out of dried hay straw. We learned how to use the riches of the forest to survive. We learned to tap birch trees for syrup (which tasted sweet and bitter), pick mushrooms and berries (blackberries, blueberries, cranberries, raspberries).

Sometimes my brother even managed to get some wild honey from the beehives.

After 18 months in the forest hope began to light our way. We slowly started to hear promising sounds of battle approaching in the distance, and when we came to look for food the villagers started to be a bit friendlier to us. They wanted to look good when the Russians arrived. They certainly didn't want to appear as if they had collaborated with the Nazis.

But with hope came other emotions too powerful to describe. It seems simple now to make generalizations about the war and the behaviour of those involved in it. It's hard to fully analyze the meaning of our survival in the forest, the relationship between the Jews and the locals, or the role the partisans and the bandits played in this conflict. But it's

important to acknowledge that those few of us who survived were more than smart or skillful. We were, quite plainly and without invoking superstition, lucky. No one could have planned escaping the beatings, the bullets and all the dangers of living in the woods and hoped to live. We “won the lottery.” No one feels personal success about this outcome, because it’s impossible that we could have survived by our wits alone while millions of others perished. The reader can’t reasonably ask why our families didn’t resist the Nazis or why we, specifically, survived under such conditions? Was it at all possible to resist them? There is simply no answer. We didn’t know how to deal with forces that were so much greater than us, and about which we knew so little. My own father didn’t believe it was coming, even when there were eyewitness accounts to attest to the persecution. It was inconceivable and we didn’t understand it. Who knew, at that time, that such perdition and hatred could exist?

That’s what I want to tell the younger generations about. How we, children, lived in the woods for a year and a half in isolation, doomed to death by the fascists. And we survived. Sometimes it wasn’t clear how. We stole potatoes, cabbage, beets, turnips. We stole them carefully, not because we were afraid to steal, although I confess at first I felt some guilt. We didn’t want to get caught, but we couldn’t have survived without that food. It is true that I have never forgotten what it means to be so hungry.

Who saved us? People ask if I believe in G-d. I say, my G-d is the forest, because I was saved by the forest. If G-d made the forest, then I believe in G-d. If G-d were very close to me, I would ask him, “Why did you allow them to kill my brother and my mother and my father? Where were you, during all that suffering?” As a child I wondered why, what did we do? I didn’t know I was guilty of anything. Why were we punished?

It is appropriate to finish this chapter with a poem written by a friend of mine from the Suvorov School in Voronezh upon his visit to Rokitno.

“These dark woods are our salvation.  
Knee deep in water, but we’re alive!  
Dreams will save us for life.  
Our dugout is the sweetest home.  
Only hope that the Germans won’t rush here  
All at once with a pack of dogs,  
That the police won’t notice with his trained eye  
The smoke through the darkness.  
We all are worth only a carton of salt.  
One kilogram is the price for your whole life:  
Your soul, and heart, and blood  
And only because you’re a Jew.”

## Chapter Four: Out of the Woods

After living for a year and a half in the woods without showers or new clothes, we were filthy, exhausted and ravenously hungry. Soon we began hearing the artillery noises nearby. That was a very good thing; it meant that the Germans were retreating. The partisans became more active and the it became easier to get food. Although we could get a broad idea about what was going on we were ignorant about the specifics. There was no radio anywhere. Information was sparse.

Finally, on January 6, 1944, the Red Army liberated Rokitno and began to further pursued the fascists. We were like wounded animals, we had a hard time adjusting to the idea that we'd have to leave the woods. Our daily sufferings had created a bond between us in the depths of the Polesje woods. The very woods that used to frighten us now were our deity, our saviour. Although we had learned to live in the safety of the woods, now we had to learn the even more horrible reality of our family and our community's fate. We left our dugout home in the woods and headed into the unknown. Exhausted and ragged, we went back, closer to the places where our childhood, our studies and our incredible suffering began. When Samuel, me and the other survivors finally gathered in the shtetl, we numbered merely 30 people. Everyone was in shock when they learned how desperately ravaged our Jewish community had been.

My brother and I specifically learned the truth about our family's tragic fate and went to visit the only people we knew in town, the Polish Wrublevski family. Our families used to be friends and as children, we were sometimes invited to celebrate New Year's at their house and pick candy off the Christmas tree. They were as kind as they could be under the circumstances. They gave us food and some clothing and let us spend the night.

Early in the morning we went into the centre of the town and met a Red Army sergeant-major by the last name of Gurinovich. He asked what happened in our town, and when we had told him the whole story he suggested my brother join a local field unit as a brigade volunteer. And that's what Samuel did. Only he first made sure that I would have a place, too.

The sergeant-major took me to Boris Markovich Krupkin, who was in charge of the field hospital # 2408 of the 13<sup>th</sup> Army of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ukrainian front. He was a short, stout man with a wide forehead. He listened to the sergeant-major's retelling of our story and ordered that I be taken to the Army bathhouse immediately, washed, and clothed with a suitable uniform until my own fitted uniform would be ready. That's how I became the so-called 'Son of the Regiment', a recruit of this hospital and officially an orphan. I was 10 years old. ([See Photo](#))

From day one I felt the warmth and care of everyone from the head of the field hospital to the head of the field pharmacy, whose name I can't recall. But I remember she was from Belarus and later became Krupkin's wife. Krupkin's first wife died during the blockade of Leningrad. My duties started right away and included helping out in the field pharmacy and the field mail room. I assisted with measuring the dosage of powders and potions. I also delivered mail to the wounded soldiers and officers. I made new friends every day, but inside I was drawn to the front. Even in these early years I had hopes of revenging my family. This was the beginning of a new chapter in my life, that of an

orphan in a uniform under the watchful eye of an entire military base. I became their favourite. They were all amazed at the instinctive resistance of a small creature to the horrors of war. They all wanted to share their love with me and save me from further harm.

The Red Army was rapidly advancing to the West, defeating the fascists, but not without casualties of their own. We could tell the difficulty, scale and success of any front mission by the number of the wounded we received. It was here that I began to understand the realities of war and its consequences, witnessing firsthand its horrors. I became a fearless vagabond. I saw with my own eyes all the wounded soldiers and officers. I can still hear them scream. I can still see the bloody bandages, made quickly in the overcrowded emergency room. I can still smell the rotting wounds. It is hard to convey all that human suffering, but it haunts me to this day.

Even though the field hospital was located fairly far from the front lines, it was still subject to German air raids. I vividly recall one such raid. It was in the town of *Dubno* and I was in the skull-and-face division of the hospital. The head of the pharmacy and I were carrying medicine to the wounded when the bomb hit and the shockwave thrashed us against the wall. It was the first time I had personally experienced such a powerful physical force. I suffered minor bodily injuries, but my memory of it cannot be erased. There were many casualties in the skull-and-face division, because the bomb directly hit a corner of the building.

My war experiences followed the path of this Field Mobile Hospital. The people that worked there were courageous, sensitive, and honest people. There were people of many different nationalities among the staff, all united in the name of fighting fascism. However, most of the doctors and administrators were Jewish and personally knew at least one person who suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

Neither air raids nor artillery strikes could stop them from their mission. Sometimes they performed surgeries without electricity by the light of the kerosene lamps. There was a Gurevich family, husband and wife, who were in charge of the roentgen machine and were always ready to assist the surgical team. They were from Moscow and while in *Brody* adopted a Jewish boy named Misha. He moved with them to Moscow after the war and I visited them there. Although destiny has parted our ways since then, these heroic people are forever in my memory and pave the progress of my childhood.

Also, it is impossible to forget our commissar, Zhiharevich, who was a middle aged woman, always wearing a leather jacket and a revolver on her belt. She was forever with the wounded, cheering them up, and loudly announcing whenever I brought in letters: “Here is Shurik with a message from home!” The atmosphere of anticipation and joy of the soldiers at that moment was indescribable.

I also remember the doctor Maya Naumovna Suhuvolskaya. She was a young woman of medium complexion with short black hair. Her white uniform was always stained with blood from the previous surgeries. This courageous woman was very motherly towards me, always finding time to ask about my past and my dreams of the future. She told me about her parents in the town of *Kyrgyztorg* in the Kyrgyzstan Soviet Republic. She told me about her postwar dreams. She wanted to marry an artillery battery captain she had met at the front and wanted to adopt me as her son. Life dictates its own story. I aspired to become a professional military man and Maya Naumovna’s love for the war officer

ended tragically. He was killed shortly before the end of the war. I don't know anything about her postwar destiny. The stories of tragedy and strength outnumber even those of hatred. These are just a few of the people I shared joy and sorrow with.

Our hospital was part of the 13<sup>th</sup> Army under command of general Puhov Nicolay Pavlovich. We followed the first echelon of the troops. The major points on our route are marked on the map. ([See the map](#)).

As the Red Army advanced and seized major strategic locations, we learned more and more about the fascists' cruelties. My first encounter with the horrors of a concentration camp happened in the Polish town of Rzeszow. We met with many witnesses and survivors and they told us their horrible stories. The soldiers who took care of me wanted to protect me from these tales, but a strong desire for revenge was growing inside of me. I wanted to revenge my relatives and my people who have so suffered from fascism.

By the end of July 1944 we were already in central Poland. The Red Army crossed the river *Vistula* and liberated the town of *Sandomir*. In that town I finally met up with my brother Samuel. We talked about our family and recalled our only aunt Rosa, who, according to our mother, left with her husband in 1933 to *Birobidzhan* to help build the Jewish Autonomic Region there. We talked about our brother Natan, who retreated with the Soviet troops in the beginning of the war.

We recalled the day the Soviet troops entered Rokitno in September of 1939 and our mother couldn't stop talking about her sister. We even prepared and mailed a care package to her in *Birobidzhan*.

The Soviet troops were already successfully fighting the fascists in other countries as well. When the liberation of Poland was underway, I saw German prisoners of war. They were not the macho soldiers who used to pose for photos. It was common then to attend, witness, and partake in the executions of the German POWs, those that had been convicted of crimes. I also saw people walking along the roads with baby strollers returning to their homes in towns and villages that were already liberated. These were people who escaped deaths in the concentration camps or deportation to Germany for heavy labor, because the Germans ran out of time. These images are etched in my memory and even today I live with them. I saw more than a person should bear to witness, but I remained normal. This is something that amazes me and remains a human mystery.

Every person who lived through the war, every citizen of the Soviet Union, from children to the elderly, remembers the characteristic radio signals and the unforgettable voice of the radio announcer Levitan. "Moscow is speaking. Here is the latest update from the Soviet Information Bureau (Informburo): the troops of the 1st Ukrainian front have successfully crossed the river Oder..." The Soviet troops had entered Germany and began defeating the fascists on their own turf.

As the Red Army entered eastern Prussia, more than two million Germans fled westward. They were German refugees fleeing from the advance of the Russians and the certain punishment they would receive for the cruelties of their fellow citizens. Our field hospital also entered Germany, following our army. As an army front boy, I saw the results and the consequences of the war over and over. I saw the German murder machine firsthand. There is only one dilemma I still cannot fathom. How could mankind allow such horror?

I also witnessed the behaviour of the Soviet army on their winning march through the German territory. I remember once seeing a woman, who was asking for help, bleeding from a knife wound inflicted by some Soviet soldier. It was his revenge and no one helped her. Rapes were very common, covered by a code signature on the walls of the houses of the rape victims: "The house is mined, senior sergeant Ivanov."

In Germany I saw my brother more frequently. I became friends with other recruits of nearby regiments and together we raided German houses for clocks, watches and other trophies for those who had relatives left and wanted to send packages back home. My brother had an idea and we started sending such packages to our only aunt in *Birobidzhan*. We put small pieces of gold and other valuable but small items into bars of soap by cutting it in half, inserting the goods and putting the two pieces of soap seamlessly back together. This was necessary because the packages were often opened and the valuables could be lost or stolen. It was much later we found out that she bartered these valuable packages for bread and other food, because by then she was a widow with an infant to feed. She didn't know the inexpensive soap was actually so valuable.

Spring came in March of 1945. The German army was losing one battle after another. Then they began to draft all young people born on and after 1929. This youth was brainwashed into believing that theirs was a noble mission as was their faith in Hitler. It was Germany's last gasp for air. The Third Reich was sinking.

As the victory became imminent, Commander-in-chief Stalin issued an order to send all the adolescent military recruits back to the home front and place them in orphanages to enable them to continue their education. All these children had already graduated from the hardest lessons of life, and now they had a chance to get secondary education and begin their youthful years anew. This order was issued in April of 1945. Its date marked the first day of a thirty year separation from my brother, Samuel.

On the day of my departure my brother handed me a small suitcase with different trophies that I might need back home. I already had a pocket knife and a small pistol to take with me which was hidden in my gear. My escort to Moscow was a pregnant nurse, who was going home to *Schelkovo*. Together we started our journey on eastbound freight trains that were loaded with technical equipment from the dismantled German factories. In Belarus we stopped in a village where the nurse's parents lived. There I witnessed the kind of postwar tragedy of the home front that was very common.

A bunch of kids found a blasting cartridge, a live bomb that weighed 200 grams. They decided to detonate it in the water to kill fish. They asked me to join them, but I knew the danger. I tried everything I knew to warn them but they were reckless and wouldn't listen. While I was standing in the distance the terrible explosion rocked the lake. One boy died and another one was severely wounded as a result of this.

Saddened, my companion and I left the village and headed for Moscow. A new world was opening up in front of me, but I adjusted quickly, the way only a child can. The city was beautiful and an enormous surprise since I was used to Rokitno and the woods. I was used to surprises by this time and I was not overwhelmed by this urban environment. In some ways, it didn't seem so imposing. In some ways it was another kind of forest to be explored and reckoned with.

In the city the nurse left me at the interim house for the recovering soldiers on route back to the frontline. It was a large centre with many people housed and working there. This

makeshift residence was at 32 *Stromynka* Street, not far from the *Yauza* River. Since I was an enlisted recruit of the army, I was eligible for all standard army allowances, including food, clothing and money. With each passing day more and more young recruits arrived at the house and thus there were more and more orphans in Moscow. I kept dreaming of a military career. I wanted to save the innocent people, now at peace, from dehumanization. But the administration of the halfway house was planning to enroll us all into different trade schools. Finally I escaped from the residence and luckily ran into an army man, captain *Musihin*, a commander of 86 *OMSR*. He took a great liking to me and enlisted me with his brigade. Once again I had met a kind, sensitive stranger along my life path. Not only did he enlist me, but he also asked his wife, who was a teacher, to teach me the Russian language.

I approached my studies with great enthusiasm, but still found time to explore Moscow. I went to the movies, which were free for those who returned from the frontlines. I was in Moscow on the day of great human joy, the end of World War II. On the radio, Levitan's powerful voice praised the people for their great victory.

It's hard to convey the happiness that filled Moscow streets. People were dancing and crying everywhere. Everyone was hugging and kissing each other. As a young man in a uniform, I couldn't take a step without someone kissing me, giving me treats, inviting into their home. On May 9, 1945, the Victory Parade took place in the Red Square and sealed this chapter in the history of mankind. It was an amazing experience in itself, but one that did wear off in time. The experiences of the war, by contrast, lasted a lifetime.

When the celebrations were over I began to pursue my dream of being a Suvorov School cadet. Following the advice of *Musihin*, I went to the Jewish Antifascist Committee in the *Kropotkin* Street. There I had a meeting with the head of the committee himself, Solomon Mihailovich Mihoels. And once again, I met a great man. He presented me with a season pass to the Jewish theatre and ordered his staff to prepare a letter of recommendation for the Suvorov Military School on my behalf. The office of the military school was very close to the *Kropotkin* Street. Shortly thereafter I became part of the regular audience at the Jewish theatre. As a result of my visit to the Jewish Antifascist Committee I also met a journalist who asked me for an interview about my life. He wrote an article titled "Haver Roiterarmeer," which was published in the Jewish newspaper "*Einikait*." One of the more interesting moments in the Committee's history was a trip to Europe and America on the mission to gain sympathetic clout in the democratic countries and convince the Jews there that Stalin's Jewish policy was a favourable one. Mihoels and Fefer headed the delegation.

My Moscow saga didn't last long, because I was called in for entry examinations to the Suvorov Military School. I had to write a dictation in Russian. I can't begin to tell you how nervous I was, because my Russian was mediocre since my studies with the wife of captain *Musihin* were at the beginner level.

Even though my dictation had many mistakes, I was accepted into the Voronezh Suvorov Military School. I ran to tell the news to the captain and on September 26, 1945, I was no longer receiving allowances in his brigade.

## **Chapter Five: The Suvorov Military School – City of Voronezh**

“I ask of my progenies to follow my example.” A. V. Suvorov

On a clear September day in 1945 I received my travel allowance and came to the Moscow train station to wait for my train to Voronezh. It was crowded at the station. There were also other children travelling to Voronezh. Sitting on a bench and looking anxiously around I wondered what awaited me at the Suvorov Military School. How would I manage with such poor knowledge of Russian? The future was foggy. Its uncertainty scared me.

My contemplation was interrupted by a woman who noticed me sitting alone. I learned her name was Tamara Akimovna Sidorova. She turned out to be the mother of one of my future best friends, Novik Sidorov. She was a middle-aged woman with an interesting and, paradoxically perhaps, a very beautiful appearance. Her voice was soft and warm. I felt comfortable telling her my short life story, rich as it was for one so young with love, luck, horror and insight. She listened to me attentively, stroking my thick black hair, and when I was finished she told her son to befriend me and invited me to spend holidays together with their family in Moscow. ([See photo](#)).

But the train came and we departed. My nervousness grew with every clinking sound made by the swiftly revolving train wheels. However, soon we began to have fun with the other boys that were travelling in the same rail car. But Novik and I stayed close together following his mother's request.

The journey was long, more than 24 hours and we had to sleep on bare cots, without any bedding. Despite the fact that the war was over, the trains were still crowded with soldiers, mostly those who were wounded and now having recovered were travelling home. Travelling civilians were mostly women, often with infants. The railcars were overcrowded and reeked of sweat. Future Suvorov cadets occupied almost half the rail car. These were boys who had survived the horrors of war, the air raids and artillery attacks, famine and the cold of the wartime. Vadim Mihanovsky says it best in his poem:

“And I remember without effort  
How we were bombed in '41,  
How the train station covered the people  
With the debris, bricks and dust.  
I won't forget the fighter jets  
Gunning down through the train roofs,  
And how the children cried in those rail cars  
Clinging to their dead mothers.”

The train wheels carried on with their melody. As they boys got acquainted, everyone shared the stories of their childhood years. Everyone tried to look older than his actual age in hopes of becoming a leader of the pack in the future. Novik was the only one I came to trust on that train and throughout many years following that journey. His loyalty

toward me was first tested on that train. Our conversation was interrupted by a comment from a boy named Victor Zhukov, who seemed older than us because he was taller. He badmouthed the Jewish people using a derogatory Russian word “*Zhid*.” Before I had a chance to say anything, my friend Novik launched at him and grabbed him, with every intention of throwing him off the moving train. Victor was taken aback, changed his manner and apologized.

Out of all the boys in the rail car I was the only one with a real military uniform, which sparked everyone’s interest and respect as a symbol of my experience, maturity and our great victory. The boys crowded the uncomfortable cots and with enthusiasm and curiosity asked questions about what it was like at the frontline. Most of them had lost their father in the war but some of their fathers were still enlisted in the Soviet Army. Finally, we arrived at the Voronezh train station. This city suffered greatly during the battles for its liberation.

Our common nervousness grew with each passing moment. The officer who was assigned to escort us to the Suvorov Military School was a very experienced fatherly man who took good care of the boys during the train journey.

We were all put into the back of a large truck and driven to *Pridacha*, a suburb of Voronezh. The road from the train station to the school wasn’t long, but it was long enough to notice the battle scars. After we passed the *Petrovsky Park*, which later would become a focal point of many important moments in my life, we drove onto the dam. After the *Chernavsky Bridge* of the Voronezh River we felt that the road had changed and became unpaved. We squatted down to minimize the impact of the truck hitting many potholes.

Then a kind of fortress rose in front of us. The sign above the heavy door read: “Voronezh Suvorov Military School.”([see photo](#)). The superintendent of the school came, talked briefly with the escorting officer and ordered to open the gates. We were dropped off at one of the barracks where we spent the night on the floor, which was covered with mattresses.

I remember having my first childish, essentially silly fight, or actually more like a confrontation, with boys from Yugoslavia. It was a test of strength rather than a display of hatred and it didn’t last long. So my first steps in the new environment and among new guys were rather rough.

The night flew by fast. In the morning we were all taken to the bathhouse, which was located in the school courtyard. The experience of that is hard to describe. When all the boys were undressing to enter the bathhouse, I hesitated and tried to think of how to hide the fact of my circumcision. How would other boys react to that? Would they make fun of me? I was the only Jewish boy there. As it turned out, the bathhouse was very crowded so no one noticed anything, but my heart was racing until I put my clothes on. All the boys liked our new uniforms.

After the bathhouse we went to the cafeteria. On the second floor we saw a table with a snow-white tablecloth and precisely set fine china. I also noticed white biscuits. I never saw such a table, not obviously in the forest, not even in my dreams. We never saw this in the Field hospital either. Our etiquette there was limited to a kettle and a spoon. Here we began to acquire discipline and order right away.

We filled the table, one by one, and facing our seats awaited the command “Sit.” Less than ten minutes later the breakfast was gone.

The first stage of our military school assimilation was the introduction of all new recruits to the current cadets. I was assigned to the precocious group, which included three other “sons of the regiment”: Kolya (Nikolai) Potozki, Victor Zhuk, Leonid Kostenko and Vanya (Ivan) Makarov. The war had interrupted our studies and now we had to catch up, but my task was even more difficult. Since my first language was Yiddish and my Russian was mostly self-taught (with the exception of a few lessons with captain *Musihin*’s wife), my Russian language skills were very poor.

We were assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon of the 6<sup>th</sup> company. Our teacher/supervisor was captain Zavialov, and his aid was sergeant-major Zenishchev.

The Suvorov Military School was founded in 1943 and by the time of our arrival it had gained some experience in the upbringing and education of the future army officers. At the core of it were some principles of the Russian Cadet academies. The teachers’/supervisors’ bedside book was “50 Years in Service” by Ignatiev. Studying here was a complicated and a rather peculiar process for a country under dictatorship. It was designed to instill in us faith in the Communist Party. But I can tell now that this goal was meant only partially, because primarily we were taught the values of group loyalty, friendship and teamwork.

The Military school was our home, family, and school. Everyday life at the Military school started with the morning physical exercises, followed by classes and study hall. Everything eventually turned into a mere routine. We were confined to four walls. As our friendships developed, various groups formed and fought for dominance. Naturally, the arrival of “the sons of the regiments” threatened the position of the older cadets, questioned their control of the younger cadets. So they tried to separate us and make us quarrel. This was all based on childish fantasies, picked up in books. The elder cadets harassed the younger ones into giving up their fruits, juice, sunflower seeds. These moments were silly, but nevertheless some boys were scared.

Our group was formed over the course of several years: Novik Sidorov, Boris Plotnik, Kolya Potozky, Leonid Kostenko others, and me. Our group was monolithic, tight and respected because it included “the sons of the regiments.”

My goal was to study Russian and other subjects, which were taught at the Military school by the best teachers of the Voronezh region. Years pass by, but I will never forget the attention I received from my teachers. A. S. Milovidov taught Russian language and literature, A. I. Darmodehina – mathematics, M. N. Postnikov - physics, S. N. Kolesnev – chemistry, P. M. Markina – geography, A. M. Kikot – French, S. V . Finin and Tutukov – physical culture (gym class), and many others. I could write a lot about each one of them. I soulfully thank them from the bottom of my heart. Many of them are no longer amongst us, but they’re always in our hearts.

The teachers were mostly officers from the frontlines, who had prior military and educational training. A hard task and great responsibility weighted heavily on their shoulders. They had to turn the orphans of a horrible war into the future elite officers. I think the fear of death in the hands of the fascists has taught me my survival skills. So I had to put extra effort into my studies, but I had to do so without other boys noticing it.

No one liked extra-diligent students. They were called “*Zubrila*.” Every night I used to go to the bathroom and stay up all night in the stall, memorizing homework for tomorrow. Day after day I was becoming more and more confident that I could handle all the knowledge given to us by the teachers. Apart from regular schooling, we also underwent tough military training and studied aesthetics, ethics, logic, psychology, and, in an interesting twist, ballroom dancing. We were encouraged to be open-minded and seek beauty in every person and every living thing. Pushkin’s words “*My friends, Our union is delightful...*” echoed through the halls.

Taking into account the importance of preparing adequate future military staff, the military school made every effort to recruit the best teachers and caretakers, who having been through the war themselves adapted special methods of educating and upbringing war orphans and children who were brought up by single mothers in poverty and famine. They took us as “the raw dough” and tried to mold us into individuals faithful to the Soviet people and the Party.

Experience has proven that our boys got good education, excellent physical conditioning, and most importantly faithful ties of friendship, which withstood the test of many years. As for the Party loyalty, not many of us paid much attention to that then. It wasn’t easy for a Jewish boy, who was brought up in a strict Jewish household with kosher cuisine, prayers in the synagogue, elementary education in *Heder* with Hebrew as the written language and Yiddish as a spoken language.

Despite my belonging to a strong group that could protect each other, once there was an anti-Semitic outburst from one of the elder cadets. I was assigned to dig a hole by the volleyball court. One boy passing by remarked: “Hey, Jew. Are you digging a grave for yourself?” I lost control of my emotions and hit him over the head with my shovel, not thinking of possible consequences. Since there was no one from my group to help me there, and this boy was much stronger than me, I shed some blood that day as well. This incident made me be more careful, become the best student academically and participate actively in all school activities. And there were many opportunities to get involved. “*Who would’ve thought that in the third year of this brutal war, we would start learning ballroom dancing as if in Peter’s times?* [Peter the Great reference] *That we’d jump around in mazurka, float in pas-zefir, and pas-d’espagne, and Boston waltz, and foxtrot and soft tango moaning...*”

Resourcefulness, common sense and wit motivated and guided me. Studying in closed quarters among all boys, we naturally were interested in the weaker sex. Girls moved our imagination.

Boys’ fantasies ran wild. There was a lot of energy. So we got an idea to arrange a series of meetings with girls from the all-girls schools. One of the first such schools was school # 23 in *Pridacha*. We picked a play that had four women parts and approached the administration of the military school to allow inclusion of girls in the rehearsals. We got permission to invite girls from the other school. Along with rehearsals we managed to spend some time in private with these girls, to dance, and even to have little romances. Those were innocent childish fantasies, but sometimes they grew into first love. Valya (Valentina) Grinkevich was my first acquaintance from that theater club. She was a fragile girl with a little nose. She lived not far from the military school so I cherished the hope that we could continue our relationship during my short time on leave of absence.

She lived with her parents in a small house. Gradually our meetings grew in frequency, both on and off stage. She was mesmerized by my stories of life in the military school and at the frontlines. She entrusted herself to me, although we both had no previous love experience. But the body called for the unknown pleasures and not thinking of consequences we pursued the passion. It happened at her house when her parents were away. It was summertime. I came over wearing my summer uniform, white shirt and black pants with red vertical stripes. The sparks flew and everything happened very quickly. However, fear of her parents' unexpected arrival prevented us from enjoying the pleasure we read about in books. Later experiences allowed us to indulge a little more. Days flew by and there was little free time. Along with a heavy academic load, I also actively competed in sports. The gym hall was enormous and we spent much time there in training sessions or competitions between the classes, companies and town teams. I participated in school cup competitions in basketball, soccer, fencing, and cross-country running community events. My results were rather good. I ran 100 meters in 11.6 seconds and was in the school top ten in fencing. This success was a result of rigorous training inspired by my desire to earn respect of my peers and the administration.

Life at the military school was filled with lessons and sport practices, so there was little time left to ourselves. We spent most of our time inside these four walls and it was difficult to escape, to breathe free air, to meet local boys and girls. The pleasure of a weekend leave of absence release was earned by hard work, exemplary behavior and flawless appearance. I recall endless check-ups on the cadets eligible for weekend release. Those boys who didn't deserve it had to rely on the fun stories of others for excitement.

Methods of disciplining were enhanced as the years progressed. In general, the discipline was built on the principle "One for all and all for one." Typical punishment was an exhausting company march all the way to *Otrozhki*. The actual guilty boys were also put in the punishment cell, which was preserved from the time the building was a state prison. It was a narrow room with a cement floor and a tiny opening in the ceiling to allow sparse sunlight. I only saw it, but was lucky enough never to have to spend time there.

Little by little I won the respect of my peers and the administration. Most boys spent their energy on various naughty escapades that conflicted with the norms of the military life. Along with some other boys, I too, participated in the so-called raids on the bread trucks and some attacks on the kitchen. That's how we used to get extra bread and meat cutlets. This was done not out of hunger, but out of a need to test the loyalty of a group in case of an emergency. This was nothing more than childish mischief, a way to release some energy.

Across from our school there were barracks with the German POWs, a constant reminder of the recent war. We could see them from the second story windows. We saw them playing soccer or getting into trucks to go work on the reconstruction of Voronezh, which their troops had destroyed. Sometimes when we'd get a release we used to wait and jump onto those trucks to get into the city faster. I remember asking the Germans where they fought. They replied that most of them were from the supply line companies. That's how we, children of the war, got to see a different side of these infamous fighting cocks.

Studies proceeded smoothly, but not altogether without adventures. I remember our French lessons. The teacher was an old lady from the tsarist times. She tried to teach us the language and acquaint us with the French culture and literature and the boys were down right cruel to her. But all this was happening during the formative years when we were only beginning to learn about discipline. I also recall an incident with the geography teacher. The boys found out about her intimate relationship with a local major and constantly giggled, made remarks. The so-called Suvorov summer consisted of a one month vacation for which everyone went home and two months in the summer camp. We lived in tents, out in nature, in the fields, and hiked to various historic places of the Voronezh region such as *Semiluki*, *Ramon*, *Usman* and others. One of our summer dwellings were the famous *Ramon* settlement gardens on the right bank of the Voronezh River. Our camp was situated right on the edge of the magnificent gardens, but we were forbidden to pick any fruit in fear of the dysentery outbreak. There was a stone line that separated the camp from the gardens. It was painted white and was called "The General Line."

I also remember an incident that happened in the summer camp of *Semiluki* between the Don and *Deviza* rivers. We developed a plan of a secret raid of the watermelon fields. During the "dead hour" of the afternoon a group of boys, including me, secretly crossed the *Deviza* River on a small boat. Our goal was to raid the watermelon field. The mission was only partly successful, because the guard noticed us and started shouting and firing his gun into the air. We carried watermelons however we could – in the T-shirts, shirts, interlocked hands. We ran for the masked boat. We loaded the watermelons, but couldn't find the paddles. So we paddled by hand all the way to the other side. That was the end of our raid. The watermelons were sweet...

Sometimes we sabotage study hall. That was easy. We'd use a needle to short circuit the electrical lines in the building and we wouldn't be asked for our homework the next day. The boys were maturing. Childish naughtiness was developing into teenage bravado. An example of such bravado would be unauthorized leave of absence, which was usually heavily reprimanded.

The influence of this childish naughtiness and teenage bravado on the boys was both positive and negative. Some saw it as courage, heroism, but the more diligent boys saw it as showing off. But nevertheless we grew older and more mature and the staff of the military school was getting better at preparing highly qualified staff for the army.

Just as not all of the tsarist cadets ended up officers, but became writers, inventors, etc. – not all of the Suvorov cadets continued their career in the uniform. My destiny was different, rough and sometimes unfair. My persistence in studies and school activities had earned me a noble place in my class. My friendship with Novik Sidorov, *Boris Plotnik and others* grew stronger. I became a leader in our group's daily life. I advanced fairly rapidly in my studies, caught up with students in my age group, and passed all exams early. Over the course of the summer I studied hard and passed exams for 9<sup>th</sup> grade as well, advancing to my appropriate age and education level. This new group had 10 "sons of the regiment." Eventually there came the time for final exams and preparation for graduation. Even prior to graduation one fellow Suvorov cadet and I were offered an opportunity to join the communist party of the Soviet Union. The year was the infamous 1951. I went through all the training and the paperwork, but in the end I was denied due

to information received from my birthplace. It stated that my father was a Jewish propagandist who dealt in Jewish literature. That wasn't true, and I still don't know who provided that false information.

Looking back I understand that was the beginning of heavy persecution and harassment of the Jews in the USSR. The famous "Doctors Trial/Case" began, soon followed by ethnic cleansing in the sciences, the field of technology and the military. Stalin was intoxicated by the victory over Hitler and completely disregarded European and American public opinion. That's when his anti-Semitism became most evident. He launched an open campaign to rid the Party, the government system, even literature of the Jews. By the end of 1948 the Jewish Antifascist Committee was closed along with the "*Einikait*" newspaper and the last of the Jewish schools. Jewish cultural leaders and writers, both communist and nationalistic, were arrested and later executed, shot. All of this turned out to be a preview of massive anti-Semitic actions that escalated in the early 1950s, culminating in the year of Stalin's death.

On January 13, 1952, the Soviet news agency TASS published a piece about the arrest of the infamous saboteur doctors groups. Back at the Suvorov Military School I was shocked after reading such awful libel against a great man, S. M. Mihoels. He was said to have been a bourgeois Jewish nationalist, a double secret agent of the 'Joint', a Jewish aid agency, and America. It was also reported that he was killed by bandits in Minsk. The day of graduation was near. On that fateful day everyone, but me, lined up to take military oath. I wasn't allowed. Despite the fact that I graduated from the Suvorov with a Silver Medal, which entitled me to pick my military officer rank, I wasn't allowed to even take the oath. I paced in the courtyard entrapped by the four walls. I didn't know what destiny had in store for me. It came as a shock to all of my closest friends as well. They tried to cheer me up with encouraging words, but they were helpless to change anything. What would I do as a civilian? Continue to study at an institute? But I didn't have any money. I felt the world was empty again. I found myself in vacuum, waiting for God only knows what.

The Military School grew quiet. All the boys left for the summer vacation or to their newly assigned destination for further study or service. I became an orphan again. Dark thoughts were clouding my head, but a firm belief in the necessity of struggle for survival prevailed.

I was left behind at the Military School. The administration didn't know what to do with me. They were probably waiting for higher echelon orders. Finally, I was allowed to take my oath. I was assigned to continue my studies and service at the Kiev Infantry Military School.

I was leaving the Voronezh Suvorov Military School with mixed feelings. On one hand I was grateful to my new home, my teachers and friends who believed in me. On the other hand I felt a heavy residue of unfairness. I understand now that my frustration should've been aimed at the dictatorial system run by maniacs and supported by their local greedy spongers. First, Hitler. Now, this. This was the second time in my life that I witnessed a coordinated effort to destroy my people, a people that gave the world such great Jewish scientists as Einstein, A. F. Joffe, L. D. Landau, Jewish artists Mihoels S., Erenburg I., Babel I., Jewish musicians and pianists Oistrakh, Gilels, Bella Davidovich, Natan Perelman and many other distinguished, hardworking people.

## **Chapter Six: Military Career and Its Consequences**

Reluctantly but with fond memories I said good-bye to my Suvorov home, where I spent part of my childhood and adolescence. I was embittered in my departure to Kiev since I was destined to continue my education in the Infantry Military School. It was located in a small cobblestone street named *Kerosennaya*. Its barracks were on a hill. Once again I found my freedom restricted and defined by the fences, checkpoints and other similar elements. I was assigned to a company consisting of Suvorov Military School alumni who came from its different branches around the country. Major Chuchmansky was the commander of this company. He was of middle height, with a serious face. All of the boys got acquainted quickly since we all were former Suvorov cadets. Three of my fellow Voronezh alumni were here in Kiev as well: Valerian Golyageen, Zhenya (Evgenyi) Chistyakov and Igor Ryabkov (see photo). The course of study here was fairly short – two years. But those were the two years when the wave of anti-Semitism rose high. There were incidents in *Podol* when the Jews would be thrown off the trams; sometimes they were beaten. The newspapers were filled with slanders about Jewish doctors. This was the atmosphere in which I tried to better myself as a soldier, prepare myself to be an officer. Significantly perhaps, among my classmates, I didn't feel any hostility or distrust. Obviously, for them I was only their fellow Suvorov cadet. I was a diligent student keeping up with others in class, during military training and in marching drills. Every weekend we would get ready for a leave of absence release to go into town. Our desire to leave campus was very strong. We wanted to mingle with the locals. Our regular hangout spot was a basement by the Golden Gates, where Fred Zolotkovsky's parents lived. Fred's father, Munus Semyonovich, and his mother, Sofa, were raising two more daughters, Marina and Zhanna, in that basement. Munus was a retired major, a World War II veteran. Wisdom, humour and zest for life best characterize his personality. He was our friend and adviser. And Sofa was a dutiful wife with a warm Jewish motherly heart. She always made sure we had enough to eat. This was a freedom haven for all of the Suvorov boys who came by.

This chapter in my life was unremarkable – typical military drills and minutiae. For us, classes here were very easy, if not to say primitive. Our group mastered the basics of military training faster than all others. We were friends. Special attention was paid not only to physical exercise, but also to study of tactics and the newest weaponry. Automatic machine gun *Kalashnikov* (AK-47) was just being developed and before we could put our hands on it, we were officially sworn into keeping our knowledge “top secret.” During the shooting practise we were accountable for every bullet and every cartridge.

Sometimes after practice we had to go out in the field with torches and melt the snow or ice to find the missing bullets.

Two years of studying went by quickly and once again we were getting ready for graduation. As the day of induction into our first military rank (lieutenant) was approaching we, former Suvorov cadets, decided to organize an alumni reunion in Voronezh. We made a map of all the places where our classmates went to continue their education. We made rules and distributed flayers about a mandatory reunion in

Voronezh. We also timed it to coincide with the next Suvorov Military School graduation in September of 1953.

I was reassigned to a Kiev Military District division, stationed in the town of *Lubny* in the *Poltava* region.

Before relocation we got an extended leave of absence release, which we used for a trip to Voronezh.

Igor Ryabkov, Valerian Golyageen, me and a few other Suvorov alumni gathered in Voronezh in the *Petrovsky* Park to discuss the details of our reunion. Valera Golyageen and I initiated the meeting. Many young officers came. Most them managed to come having received their first salary. It was a very interesting reunion, because not only members of our class came, but also older alumni, who were now experienced officers. Having found out about this massive impromptu reunion, the administration of the Military School called Valera and I in and chastised us for not informing them in advance and not reporting directly to the School, our home, but staying in hotels and at other people's houses. All alumni in attendance were ordered to report immediately to the Military School. Beds with snow-white sheets were placed in the gym where young cadets stood on honor guard. This reunion showed that the tradition of friendship had grown into a tradition of brotherhood. These reunions became an annual event.

We were maturing, gaining different military as well as civilian experience. Friendship and kind memories of our teachers filled our souls, souls of the children of war. It was a very emotional reunion for us as well as current cadets, teachers, and, of course, our former girlfriends who were very eager to see us again. We all shared stories, memories, opinions about this and that. We also listened to stories of those who already got combat experience in the Arab countries. I was greatly interested in that, because I knew that my brothers lived in Israel.

I must say that their evaluation of the competency and capabilities of the Arab countries' military was objective. I heard many stories about military training of the Israeli army as well. I was very anxious. I wanted to learn more about that part of the world.

As planned, the reunion coincided with the 1953 Suvorov Military School graduation. The tables were set in the cafeteria in the shape of a Russian letter "P," which looks like this – Π. The administration set on one side, graduating cadets on the other and alumni and teachers shared the third side. I sat next to our chemistry teacher and three of my closest friends: Novik, Valera and Boris.

Arsik Kolumbov was the first to propose a toast. He was blond, short and stout. Since alcohol consumption was officially banned at the Military School, the toast was proposed with a non-alcoholic beverage. However, our chemistry teacher suggested that, historically speaking, army officers never celebrated anything without a stiff drink. Consequently the waitresses were quietly ordered to bring in bottles of liquor under condition that the young cadets won't be served alcohol.

After the banquet, there was a concert and a dance, but there was to be even more! The celebration wasn't over at the Military School that night. The next day it continued at a restaurant. We invited our teachers and mentors, but not the administration. It turned into a real drunken riot, and I was actually arrested by the Voronezh Commandant's Police as "an organizer of group binge drinking." With such reputation/label I went to *Lubny* in

Poltava region to join my new regiment. The regimented life quickly drew me back into a life of daily military routine. I was made a commander of a company and in a short while was reassigned to a sniper training camp. I must confess, the days went by in devastating boredom. The senior officers drank nightly, buying bootleg vodka in the local villages.

Life in *Lubny* was dull and gray. Young officers went to dances at the Officers' Club and sometimes to private parties held usually by girls in their homes. My goal was to get higher education and I used every opportunity to apply to a Military Academy. My first attempt was in *Lubny* and I was called in for entry examinations to the Academy of Communications. These exams took place in Kiev. Igor Ryabkov and I went there and successfully passed the exams; even so, I was summarily denied academy admission.

Now I can assure you that only a single entry in the 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph of my passport prejudiced the administration and prevented me from going there. The fifth paragraph in Soviet passports required listing your ethnicity. My passport most likely said "Jewish".

Despite this setback I kept my good spirits and continued my service. Shortly thereafter I was reassigned to the 51<sup>st</sup> motorized infantry regiment in the town of *Kandalaksha* in the Northern Polar Military District. Colonel Kobetz was a commander of the regiment.

Upon my arrival my military life continued without any changes or alternations, except for the climate conditions. Summer that far north is the season of White Nights, when it's light and you can't tell a difference between day and night for six months. The only indication of an evening is that the bright sun lowers closer to the horizon line. Then Polar night comes and darkness lasts for another six months.

This part of the country was famous for its close proximity to the North Pole. The history of the town itself was connected to local prisons, inmates of which (including many women) built the *Niva-3* electric power station. The inmates lived in barracks and grounded train cars, all lined up one next to another. There was a bright light pole next to each building. Another peculiarity of the place was large quantities of salmon, which was usually caught in canals during spawning. Even though this military town was fairly isolated it had its cultural center – the Officers' Club, which conducted various activities. It's noteworthy that there was a rather large contingency of Jews here in this harsh, bleak part of the globe. Among the officers there were doctors, musicians, minesweepers, etc. I spent more than three years in service in this tundra of low greenish swamps and small stone hills. In these harsh conditions I learned more about all sides of life, both positive and negative. I must confess; there was more negativity than positive feeling at the time. There was however, in this gray and cold part of the country, one very bright ray of hope. I met my future wife while surrounded by these bleak conditions. It happened at our common friends' party hosted by the Polotzkiy and the Katz families. They introduced me to Marina Zeitlina, who came to *Kandalaksha* as a doctor right after graduation from the Moscow Medical Institute. Our meetings became more frequent. We used to meet at Tamara and Alik Polotzkiy's or Rimma and Grisha [Gregory] Katz's apartment.

During our meetings we each told our own life and family story. We talked about our education and, of course, the issue of anti-Semitism was often discussed. We both had our own past, but our friendship grew stronger every day. This was my only solace in the far North.

Tamara Polotzkaya was a doctor at a *Kandalaksha* hospital, and her husband Alik was an officer in a special communications battalion. We often talked about Tamara's parents.

Her father, Mark Yakovlevich Tzipin, was a war veteran and a military doctor. After the war he was one of the people accused in “the doctors’ case.” He was convicted according to paragraph 58, but later pardoned. The Polotzkiy family was wonderful and we enjoyed knowing them.

Rimma Katz was also a doctor, and her husband Grisha and I served in the same division. He was a minesweeper.

Grisha and I participated in many military trainings and drill together. During the summers, for almost two years we conducted an important, but very dangerous task of clearing the mine fields along the border with Finland. We were stationed in the regions occupied by the German forces during WWII. Our battalion was housed in the same barracks as the Nazi soldiers. It’s hard to forget myriads of mosquitoes with their annoying nightly buzzing “symphonies” and clouds of tiny bugs during the day. These insects drew blood on our legs all the time. This was a dangerous but tedious and mundane task. Here I once again witnessed death of soldiers and wounds of the officers. I was lucky, because there were no casualties in my regiment.

I was ordered to escort the bodies of dead soldiers to their resting grounds in the *Zapolarje* [Polar] region. We often had to take boats across many of the local lakes. What a bitter paradox! Here we were in an inflatable boat with a casket/coffin, surrounded by breathtaking landscapes and intoxicating natural beauty. We sailed by tiny, perfectly round islands with birch groves. Fish jumped out of the water and glistened in the light of a bright, but cold sun. It’s impossible to believe in death even if you feel its presence in such beauty and silence.

For me, these two summers were filled with many other experiences of the consequences of war. In these harsh conditions we were subject to new training standards set forth by an order of Marshal Zhukov, who was Minister of Defense at the time. I especially remember winter drills when I had to sleep in cave-like holes, which soldiers dug in the snow. It was so cold that sometimes we’d even built a fire inside the holes and the walls wouldn’t melt. Everyone who has ever served in the army knows what tactical drills are. Now imagine it done beyond the Polar circle, in winter! This was a test of character and will meant to prepare us for the most difficult of missions. I got such a test immediately upon arrival to *Kandalaksha*. A two-day, 48 hour cross-country skiing marathon through the frost. We took our skis off only during short breaks en route and to sleep in the deep snow banks of *Zapolarje*. Our group of skiers, in white masking gear, moved very slowly. I was the leader of my regiment and had to be the first to make the tracks.

However, it was so hard that everyone had to rotate every 200 meters. We endured long treks, entrenchment, mock attacks and simulated contamination. As soon as they heard the order to stop for a break, most soldiers passed out from exhaustion. We continually had to do roster calls to make sure that no one froze to death in their sleep. The field training, which seemed interminable, finally came to an end and we were ordered to return. Everyone was deeply exhausted and couldn’t wait to get back home.

Our only opportunities to have fun were restricted to meeting with understanding friends and visiting various evening programs at the Officers’ Club. That’s where I met the conductor of the district orchestra, Major Michail Aronovich Safian. He was short, stout, but very energetic. Upon initial meeting people were usually taken aback by his slight speech impediment and a nervous twitching of his mouth. However, this man has

influenced me greatly. He was full of energy, especially when conducting. He was a war veteran, a famous wartime composer and conductor, author of a popular poem “Odessa – Hero City,” and a mentor to a whole group of distinguished musicians. He was a true “*Odessit*” – a native of Odessa. He was proud of his city, its humor, its people, the beauty of its streets and clarity of its sea air. I met him again in Odessa shortly before I left the country and he vowed never to leave his city again. But history proved that even for this extremely talented man there was no future in Russia. Many years later I came across a newspaper article about his 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and decided to seek him out. This time, it was under very different circumstances. I found him again, unexpectedly, in the famous Brighton Beach, coincidentally in another port city, this time New York.

Meanwhile, the gray routine of the cold North made my determination to continue my education even stronger. I applied again. I applied to the automobile transport department of the Military Academy of the Civilian Home Front and Transportation. I was rejected on the basis of the same unhappy paragraph 5 in the passport. Losing hope, I went on with my service.

## **Chapter Seven: The Political ‘Thaw’ and My Progress**

It took an enormously meaningful political upheaval before anything at all developed in my own immediate situation. Nothing seemed to develop until the death of Stalin. The atmosphere was changing in the country. Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev came into power. “One Day in the Life of *Ivan Denisovich*” by Solzhenitsyn was published. The Stalin mythology slowly began to wear out. I got a chance to try my luck for the third time and apply to the military communication department of that same Military Academy of the Civilian Home Front and Transportation. Only five people were to be admitted into the program. My application was accepted, but I still had to pass the entrance exams. Since I graduated from the Suvorov School with a Silver Medal, I only had to take one mandatory exam in mathematics.

At that time I met up with Zhiharevich, the former commissar of the Field Hospital. It turned out that after demobilization she came to Leningrad and became an academic dean at the distant education department of the Leningrad Institute of Cinema and Engineering. Our reunion was very heartfelt. She introduced me to her brother, who was a math teacher. He gave me some tests and after reviewing my answers concurred that I was ready to take any math exam. During subsequent meetings with this wonderful educated man I learned more about his fate. He fought at the frontlines, was captured by the Germans, survived and returned to his hometown of Leningrad. There he was arrested and sent to prison as a traitor. He was later pardoned as “wrongly accused.” There were many documented stories like that.

I passed the exams and was enrolled in the Academy. Before saying good-bye to my friends in *Zapolarje*, I decided I wanted to spend my life with one particular person who shared my long northern days. It was Marina Tzeitlina. She was planning a vacation in the South. I suggested she come by and visit me in Leningrad on the way back north. We met, and after some discussion we parted maintaining status quo. She went to the south. I went to Leningrad. Preparation for the new school year began. I was assigned a dorm room and then, after meeting with the chairman of the department of fuels and lubricants, I agreed to transfer to that department.

Studying in the academy was not easy, but I was living my dream. I knew that I could survive in this country ruled by open anti-Semitism only by being successful in my studies. The course of studies ran five years. During this time I met and formed relationships with many other students. Most of them were married and already had stable families. I was still a bachelor.

I spent my years in the academy not only studying, but also exploring the wonderful Hero City – Leningrad. The signs and scars of the cruel war were noticeable everywhere. I met a few of the city natives who survived the infamous blockade. Every now and then I saw some of them in the cafeteria of the Mariinsky Theater where I often stopped to grab a bite. My dormitory was located nearby at 2 Glinka Street. Living in the heart of the city I

often went to the museums and theaters; and on weekends I went dancing. Despite availability of a multitude of cultural events – a stark contrast to my previous residence – I felt lonely and wanted to settle in my private life. Shortly thereafter I received a letter from Marina. She said she was planning to visit me in Leningrad on her way from a southern resort *Hosta* back to *Kandalaksha*. Soon I was walking with Marina along the Nevsky Boulevard. It was a clear day. The sun was shining brightly. Its rays illuminated a monument on the Anichkov Bridge – a great monument by Rastrelli. Walking along the Nevsky Boulevard we came by a popular café “Nord.” I suggested we stop there for a cup of coffee.

I proposed in that café. I asked Marina to be my wife. She agreed and we began planning the official ceremony. Since we were not far away from the Civil Registry office, we decided to file all the necessary paperwork and get married right away. We were told we had to wait a month.

This was not suitable, so I adapted to the situation. I didn’t think clumsy coercion would work, so I decided to use a more sophisticated approach. I bought a box of chocolates and proceeded to plead with the girls that worked there to expedite the process on the grounds that Marina still had to go back to work up north. My efforts were successful. We were married within three days, on October 30, 1957.

That day we bought a bottle of Champaign and went to her relatives place where she was staying. They were very excited and even managed to come up with a spontaneous dinner reception. That was our first wedding celebration. The next day my lawful wife left to *Kandalaksha* to say good-bye to that gray northern land and later return to Leningrad to build our future together. Recalling those days I can truthfully say that despite extreme simplicity and confusion of the whole affair, it was quite romantic.

My search for housing began. I started going to a market where people were offering rooms and, sometimes, whole apartments for rent. That market was called “*Malkov* bazaar.” It reminded me of the famous “*Privoz*” market in Odessa. All my efforts to get a room through the academy proved futile, because only upperclassmen had priority in housing. Apartment hunting in this city was a very long process, but since it was decided that after coming from the North Marina would go to Moscow first so we could have a wedding with her family there.

I wasn’t in a terrible rush. My vacation was coming up. I was very excited and looked forward to its first day with much anticipation. I met Marina’s parents, but I didn’t know the rest of her family. Her father, Aaron Grigorievich, was a man with a strong build. He had a wide forehead, which looked even wider than it naturally was because he was balding. He was very smart, very tactful, and also a great handyman. He had what we call “golden hands.” He was chemist by profession, a Mendeleev Institute graduate.

Later I learned more about his childhood and the rest of his life. His childhood began in a small village of *Seno* in the *Vitebsk* region of Belarus. His family was large and to make sure there was enough food for everyone he had to work as a pharmacist’s assistant at age 14. He was brought up in a strict Jewish orthodox family similar to mine. Working in a pharmacy he continued to be true to his Jewish roots. His native tongue was Yiddish. Eventually he and his brothers moved to Moscow where he wed Rita Moiseevna Zeitlin. It turned out that their last names were identical even though they were not related at all.

Rita Moiseevna, Marina's mother, also came from a poor Jewish family in *Melitopol*, Ukraine. After she graduated from a lyceum, she came to Moscow, studied at the medical institute and became a doctor. In the beginning of WWII, Aaron Grigorievich was drafted to serve in the military and his family were evacuated from Moscow.

The evacuation period was hard on my wife's family. In her own way, Marina was suffering from the horrors and the consequences of this awful war, too. Her family wasn't starving to death, but they didn't live in prosperity either. Rita Moiseevna had to raise two children alone, while working full time caring for many other sick kids, trying to save them.

Our wedding took place at their home in the *Bolshaya Filevskaya* Street. This undertaking was quite an ordeal, typical of the Soviet times. Everything had to be "found" because of harsh shortages of everything. Since some patients of my wife's mother worked in the food industry we managed to "find" food for the modest banquet. As for the alcoholic beverages, that was a task for a famed chemist Aaron Grigorievich. He brewed his own liquor from his own secret recipes.

There were about forty people present, mostly Marina's relative, but also my best friend Novik and his remarkable mother Tamara Akimovna. It's hard to imagine now how exactly we all fit into that tiny apartment. Thank God the neighbors allowed us to use their part of the flat. They even were so nice as to give up their bedroom for our first night as husband and wife. That was as romantic as reality could get then.

After this vacation we returned to Leningrad together and actively began looking for an apartment and seeking employment for Marina. Upon a reference from some of our friends in *Kandalaksha*, we were given a room in the basement of a house where officers lived on the school grounds of the 1<sup>st</sup> Artillery School. We had to go through a checkpoint every time to get home. Our living conditions were indescribable. It reminded me of the basement in Gorky's play "The Lower Depths". Of course, I'd seen far worse conditions as a child, but my wife had a hard time adjusting to the situation. As a result of a major effort, my wife found a job as a children's doctor in the 19<sup>th</sup> Outpatient Clinic of the *Kirovsky* borough. I continued to advance in my military and engineering studies.

Our family life began in Leningrad. My studies and Marina's work took up most of the time. In free time we went to theater, movies and museums. That was food for our souls. Academic life went on without difficulties. My classmates didn't particularly interest me. They were predominantly officers from different parts of the country who had little knowledge of mathematics and little general cultural baggage. Given my excellent education at the Suvorov Military School, I was able to tutor many of my classmates on various subjects. Semesters went by quickly. In between, we vacationed in the south.

Those were pleasant days of our life. We vacationed in the resort town *Evpatoria* by the Black Sea with our friends from the north, Rimma and Grisha Katz.

But throughout all these years I was haunted by the memories of the horrible years spent in the ghetto and in the forest. I really craved an opportunity to reunite with my brothers; separation from them was like death to me.

I still hoped to meet my only aunt who lived in *Birobidzhan*. My dream came true in 1960 when with great difficulty she came to Leningrad. This was our second meeting. The first one took place in Moscow, but Tamara Akimovna constantly kept an eye on us trying to limit our communication under the guise of looking out for my best interests.

Our second meeting was “unsupervised” and allowed me to learn more about my family and about my aunt’s hard life. From her stories I heard for the first time about the cruelties of the Stalin regime towards the Jews and other ethnic minorities. From her I learned about the infamous Gulag Archipelago.

Our daughter was born on June 7, 1961. It was a joyous day, although it happened so that I couldn’t be by Marina’s side during birth. I was busy with the exams and she went to Moscow to deliver our baby there. My life became fuller that day. I felt more responsibility.

My studies in the academy were boring, uneventful. I studied engineering and military sciences along with the Party-affiliated political subjects. I graduated from the academy in 1962. We began another round of wandering the territory of this great multiethnic country. I was reassigned to the *Prikarpatski* Military District as an assistant commander of the technical support unit in the town of *Vladimir Volynsky*. The commander of the unit was an alumnus of my academy, captain Ilin. Our unit was located in the outskirts of the town. It was basically a regional fuels and lubricants storage facility responsible for supplying the troops with all the necessary fuels and lubricants and pure alcohol for aviation. I was responsible for the technical and technological aspects of storage.

When I found myself back in Western Ukraine, the memories of my horrific childhood rushed back into my mind. Even dialects and little local traditions reminded me of the terrifying years I spent here. I had no desire to visit *Rokitno*, the town where I was born, spent my childhood, got my Jewish education, and, perhaps more significantly, witnessed many horrors. I was trying to block my feelings and emotions. I channeled all my energy into my work and my family. Although I had found myself in Western Ukraine I was still a Soviet army officer and took my duties seriously. But to do my job I didn’t need any of the knowledge I gained in the academy.

## **Chapter Eight: Intrigue Raises An Unwelcome Face**

It may have been predictable, given the internal and world tensions of the times, but soon the fragile tranquility that we experienced in our tiny bubble of concerns was broken by the events in the international geopolitical arena. Mainly, the Cuban crisis began. . Our district began heavy drafting and even our unit was receiving new recruits daily. Our unit was trained to be ready to build a pipeline to supply our troops with oil. There was panic in the streets. There was little information. Women and children were crying sending soldiers off to the army. It reminded me of the beginning of the previous war. Some of the units within our division were relocated to Poland and Germany. But my unit stayed put. This period of extreme stress and uncertainty didn't last long thanks to the persistence of the US President Kennedy. This period is known in history as "the Cuban missile crisis."

My routine work in the military storage and fairly monotonous life in this little town was very dull. Marina worked as a doctor in a small railroad hospital. Our daughter was attending kindergarten part-time. We had a really big problem with nannies that we had to change frequently, because most of them were alcoholics or psychologically unstable. That was our reality.

A visit from Aaron Grigorievich, Marina's father, was a real holiday for us. Our town of *Vladimir Volynsky* turned out to be one of the first towns occupied by the Jews who flooded Eastern Europe trying to escape the Spanish Inquisition. Before the war, two thirds of its population was Jewish, but only three or four of its people survived WWII. We made contact with them as well as with the families of other Jewish military personnel. Life in the military demanded flexibility and compatibility to any type of conditions and all kinds of relationships, especially for the Jews. The period of service in this town consisted of mainly military business, home errands like "finding" food products, wood or coal for heating, and frustrating task of looking for a caretaker for our daughter.

Aaron Grigorievich helped us with our daughter a great deal. It was a pleasure to spend days in the company of this intelligent man. There were days when we'd go to the forest to pick mushrooms. There were so many mushrooms that Aaron Grigorievich was able to pick a whole big bucket of white mushrooms even without his glasses on. These trips reminded me of the time when I was trying to survive in the forest eating these fairly easily accessible mushrooms.

Until 1964 my life went on without any negative incidents in my professional or personal life. This peace was ruined in an instant when I was ordered to report to captain

Odarchenko, the chief of SMERSH (Special Secret Military Service). His office was located not far from our house.

That turned out to be only my first meeting with this horrible Soviet organization. I was sure that there was nothing questionable in my service past so the purpose of this visit was a mystery to me. I was ordered to report to the office alone without anyone knowing where I was or noticing where I went. These instruction alone instilled fear and uncertainty in me. Although the initial meeting was very nice and friendly, I still had no clue why I was called. Odarchenko asked me if I knew of many Jewish officers, one in particular – assistant commandant of the antiaircraft artillery regiment who presumably had lost a secret map during one of the field training sessions. Of course, I'd never heard of him or this story. After this Odarchenko began asking me about my family history. One of the questions was related to what I knew about my brothers. He showed me several pictures I didn't know existed. He asked me to go home and recall "everything," although I'm still not sure what he meant by that. I was ordered to return the following night, but after dark. When I got home my only concern was for my brothers who lived in Israel and with whom I had no direct line of communication, indeed I had no means of communication at all.

The next day I went late at night to captain Odarchenko for yet another interrogation. This time his manner was more aggressive, I'd even say provocative. First of all, I was told not to tell anyone anything about our conversations. Secondly, my wife was to report to him the following day as well.

During our conversation I said that I had three brothers, that one of them was killed by the Germans, and that I had lost touch with the other two long ago. My wife had a very brief conversation with him the following night, and signed a paper stating that she would not tell anyone about these meetings with the special service agents. In a few days I was asked to come back to see Odarchenko, who showed me a case cover for a new case under investigation. It wasn't my name on the cover. It read "NOV," a pseudonym of my best friend from Suvorov Military School, Novik.

A few days later I was asked to see Odarchenko again and he told me that my brother's wife was coming to Moscow and that I had to take my family to see her. I tried to get out of this "offer" saying I was sick, which I was. My body temperature was high – 39 degree Celsius. I understood that this meeting wouldn't be free and easy. On the other hand, the truth was that I really wanted to see her. Most of all I wanted to get rid of my constant fear that the state officials would come messing with my life. They fabricated a telegram from Moscow saying that my wife's parents were sick and that we have to urgently come to Moscow.

The telegram was authorized and validated by a local doctor, so even my immediate superior, Ilin, didn't know about this secret family reunion. Prior to departure to Moscow we received an unexpected letter from my wife's parents telling us that my brother's wife, Haya, was coming to Moscow. My aunt Rosa wrote them about it from *Birobidzhan*.

A strange detective novel began unfolding. My last instruction from Odarchenko was to meet a KGB representative in a park in *Fili* immediately upon arrival to Moscow. The morning of our arrival I went to this secret meeting with a KGB major. His instructions were to listen carefully to everything my brother's wife would say and tell him; if she

were to offer any books or print material, to accept and pass it on to him as well. And not to go there wearing my army uniform. I asked him if I could bring flowers. He said: "Positive."

Haya was staying with her tourist group in the Cosmos hotel. I could take Aaron Grigorievich as my interpreter for this emotional meeting. I purposely neglected to tell the authorities that I could perfectly speak Yiddish myself.

The long awaited day of the meeting finally came. I was very nervous. My desire to meet a person who represented a live link to my brothers was mixing with a fear of knowing that we're being watched and that anything can happen. By that time I knew what the KGB was capable of.

Aaron Grigorievich and I bought a bouquet of flowers and went to the Cosmos hotel to meet Haya, wife of my brother Samuel who was suspected of espionage for Israel. We met and went for a walk. The meeting was very tense. Our conversation was translated from Yiddish into Russian and back. She was telling us about her family and asking us about ours. We, of course, boasted how wonderful our life here was even though we ourselves didn't believe it. But that was our survival reflex under dictatorship.

Fear wouldn't let go of me. All my thoughts were focused on the strangeness of this encounter. How would this end for me? I had no idea.

Our second meeting with Haya took place in the *Gorky* Park. There was so much confusion. She of course brought us presents. We of course had to report them to the KGB. Soon it was time to return to Vladimir Volynsky, to my unit. I had to keep secret my real trip even from my immediate superior. But soon I was called in again to the *SMERSH* office for a rather long interrogation about my meeting in Moscow. The conversation started out gently. First, they praised my service achievements, but the tone gradually shifted to threats and blackmail. They demanded to know "the truth." I had nothing to hide. The visit of my sister-in-law had only one mission: to see me and say hello from my brothers. I know *Haya* saw fear in my eyes and couldn't understand why. She still cannot understand why I didn't just speak Yiddish with her. Captain Odarchenko conducted the interrogation alongside several other *SMERSH* officers from the town of *Rovno*.

Captain Odarchenko, do you remember my visits to your office in *Vladimir Volynsky*? Or maybe you're Colonel X? The former chief of *SMERSH* in the Luzk region, where are you? Let's recall how you and your faithful staff pressured me. Do you remember how during my mandatory meetings you threatened and blackmailed me? There were three of you and I was alone...

After a while the *SMERSH* folks left me alone and I continued to work as an assistant commander of the technical support unit. Then my commander Ilin was transferred to a teaching position at a military department of the Ivano-Frankovsk Oil Institute. I was offered to take his position. It was an unexpected development for me because my relatives lived abroad, but I accepted the offer and in my new capacity I took over overseeing all valuable materials in the storage.

I had my own assistant, a senior lieutenant Andrianov who was a son of a military man from *Brest*. Andrianov was a rather tall guy with a bright mind and a kind heart. Our relationship was smooth from the beginning. Other military personnel consisted of a secret service lieutenant, express service sergeant major Medkov and a laboratory chief.

Our civilian staff was made up of storage supervisors, lab assistants, workers, drivers, a dog-breeder and a full crew of firemen.

I worked hard to make sure my storage was the best in the division and I succeeded. I demanded discipline from everyone, but I also made every effort to beautify and better our territory and its surroundings. I initiated construction of an indoor garage for the vehicles, which were on reserve in case of urgent mobilization. The construction business had its own challenges, mainly lack of building materials, which I once again had to “find” using my resourcefulness and quick wit. I managed to get the garage completed. That was my first experience as a constructor/builder.

During its annual check-ups, the administration of the *Zakarpatsky* Military district noticed the organizational changes in the operation of my storage and acknowledged the enhanced efficiency of the oil supply system.

Time progressed rapidly and I gained respect of the administration of both the division and the district. Yet I couldn't help but wonder why was I promoted to a lieutenant colonel's position when I was only a captain and why I was kept in this capacity for eight years? That was unheard of! My work routine dragged on and on. I had a good relationship with my staff. My assistant and I often went fishing, celebrated holidays together and once went to visit his parents in *Brest*. We hired a new lab assistant, a young woman with technical education. Shortly thereafter Andrianov started to frequent the lab. While Andrianov was having an affair with the lab assistant Natasha, his wife Shura began an affair with the second secretary of the district administrative committee, who happened to be my next-door neighbor. This story was sinking deeper and deeper into disaster. The first secretary of the district administrative committee found out about it, called me in his office and suggested to transfer Andrianov to a different unit. The military district administration, obviously, learned about all of this as well.

Soon Andrianov was indeed transferred to a different unit and his family moved to a different town. Thus these two budding affairs didn't have an opportunity to develop into something else. Even so, later I learned that Andrianov still managed to maintain his long distance affair with the lab assistant.

However, the transfer of my assistant was a big loss. Andrianov was an honest, approachable man. He always treated me with respect and more than once had defended me against personal slander. For example, once when I was away on family vacation, a military tribunal team came to investigate an accusation of illegal activity and scheming on my behalf. I was accused of spending government money, selling gas and oil equipment and other materials from the storage. Later I found out that a driver of the fireman squad, who was a secret KGB agent, made this ridiculous claim. Andrianov defended my honor tactfully, with factual proof, without me even being present.

There is another noteworthy instance, which involved Andrianov and his lab assistant lover. During the famous six-day war in Israel, when I was once again on vacation, the wife of sergeant major Medkov wrote an open letter claiming that I, a Soviet army officer (!), was raising funds to support Israel and even communicated with the Israelis using state radio transmitters. She distributed this letter in town and began collecting signatures against me. She asked the aforementioned lab assistant to sign. Natasha refused and immediately told Andrianov about the letter. He called me right away and came to visit

the next day. He told me the news over a bottle of cognac in a restaurant. I broke into cold sweat, because I knew what such claims could lead to.

As it turned out, the lab assistant and others refused to sign any petitions and were angry with the slandering sergeant major's wife. Such occurrences made me always be alert and ready for any attack, any consequence. In such atmosphere I had to keep up the good work and stay calm. In another interesting development, during the Israeli Six Day war I was promoted to the rank of a major, despite the eight years delay. Three more officers of other fuel and lubricants storage facilities were promoted as well.

We, the district officers in leadership positions, had a training session to analyze the outcome of the six-day war. The presenters evaluated the actions of both the Israelis and the Egyptians. The Egyptian military and material resources were characterized as a significant cut above the Israeli, but the Israeli tactics were considerably superior. It was acknowledged that Israel managed to mobilize its troops much faster than even our district during emergency drills.

During the training session my colleagues found out about my promotion and according to the military tradition decided to celebrate the additional epaulet stars of all four newly promoted officers. This tradition is called "washing the stars," because the new epaulet stars were placed at the bottom of a large glass filled with vodka and an officer had to drink it bottoms up to get his stars. I was getting ready to do that as well when to my surprise I learned that actually my new rank wasn't approved. No explanations were available. I realized there and then that my military career had reached a dead end.

Upon return to my unit I knew that my fate had been decided and was in the hands of the secret security office. Events unfolded fast. I was ordered to report to the office of the district human resources chief, general major Usov. I didn't know the purpose of this visit, but our conversation was not friendly. Out of the blue he asked me how old my parents were. When I said I didn't know exactly, he yelled and reproached me saying that even his three years old granddaughter knew her grandfather's birthday. I thought I'd get reassigned to Mongolia. However, shortly after returning to my unit I was called in again to the district headquarters, but this time to meet with the fuels and lubricants chief.

I had no prior knowledge of the purpose of this visit either. This time the conversation started with inquiries about details of my family history. I was reproached for hiding the fact that I had brothers who lived in Israel. After a brief conversation, another officer joined in. He was ordered to escort me back to *Vladimir Volynsky* and take over the unit, all its materials and documentation.

The handover of the unit was rushed, breaking all the corresponding protocol rules, including the procedural rules regarding handover of secret documents. Usually a handover committee was formed. Not this time. The whole affair took three days. I was given an honorable discharge on the basis of a scheduled personnel layoff. I registered with the local military enlistment committee as a retiree. For the first time in my adult life, I was a civilian.

## **Chapter Nine: The Events of an Unnatural Life**

A new unfamiliar civilian chapter of my life had started. I decided to stay and live in *Vladimir Volynsky* where everyone knew me well, but I didn't know what I would do. Soon I was asked to report to the first secretary of the administrative district Party committee, who offered me a position of the chief engineer at a brick factory. Given the fact that three previous chief engineers were now in jail, convicted of state property theft, I understandably got very scared. But I accepted the position and began learning the ins and outs of this new, for me, business. The majority of the factory workers were local West Ukrainians. They still recalled life in bourgeois Poland and I knew their mentality very well. The director of the factory was a retired colonel, former commander of an antiaircraft regiment. He welcomed me warmly once he found out I was an engineer-mechanic and knew my way around heavy machinery. Thus began my new civilian job. It didn't take long for me to learn my new trade and I quickly became "a brick specialist." During my time in this position I learned of workers who refused to work during religious holidays despite deliberate otherwise instructions from the district Party administration. I succeeded in keeping up with the brick production quotas assigned by the government. To expand my knowledge of the brick business I was sent on a business trip to a well-established brick factory in the town of *Chernovzy*.

So I became a specialist in brick production. It was a fast paced process. We used horses to pull wagons with hot, 'fresh out of the oven' bricks, which we dried out in the open under the sun. We had other branches, which produced slacked lime and bricks, but in lesser quantity. The director and I made trips to check up on those smaller factories. These visits always ended with heavy drinking. I knew that this job in this town was a passing phase. I had to wait to make my next move. This unhappy country had many paradoxical laws, such as residency registration. According to this law a person who was born in one place, but moved somewhere else, would have a really hard time moving back to his/her hometown.

We wanted to move to Moscow. In order for us to do so we had to file for divorce. Marina took our daughter and moved in with her parents in Moscow and I stayed in *Vladimir Volynsky* waiting for things to clear. This was a very anxious time, but results justified the means. Marina headed for Moscow and I continued my "brick" job, counting days till I could get a green light note from my wife, quit my job and prepare for

our second marriage to each other. As soon as I got word that Marina registered as a permanent resident and even started working, I quit and started packing for Moscow. The director of the factory knew that sooner or later I'd leave. He understood that a dead end job in the middle of nowhere was not for me, that I deserved a better, more interesting job while there was no reason for him, a retiree, to crave such radical change.

I started packing for Moscow where once again the uncertainty of unemployment awaited me. Upon arriving in Moscow one could start looking for a job only after one gets his/her residency registration, which was possible to obtain only through marriage to a Moscow citizen, and even then you had to bribe the registration officials. So I married the same woman twice, only to permit a move to a different city.

The next chapter in my saga was a three months long search for a job in Moscow. The main reason for this delay was the fact that most job applications now contained a question about relatives abroad. I couldn't hide it anymore, so I kept looking for a place that wouldn't make this inquiry. Finally, I found it. I was hired as a senior engineer at a Special Design Bureau (*SDB*) “*TransNeftAvtomatika*” [Trans Oil Automatics] with a salary of 120 rubles.

My application was also accepted by a scientific institute “*Neftezavody*” [Oil Factories]. But the institute's secretary of the Party department didn't know about it, because he was on vacation. When he returned and reviewed my application, I was called into his office and told that my application would have to be reviewed at a special hearing of the institute Party committee. That signaled a denial for me and sure enough, I was right.

There were a few cases like that, so I decided to take the position of the senior engineer at the *SDB* “*TransNeftAvtomatika*.” In my new capacity I actively pursued this new field of knowledge. As in the past, my diligence and survival instincts allowed me to gain respect of both my coworkers and the administration.

In due time I was appointed a chief project engineer and later an assistant director of the standardization and pricing department. To successfully adapt to my new position I enrolled in the long distance courses at the Institute of Standardization and Metrology. Upon successful completion of the course of study there, I began developing Government Standards of oil equipment production and usage for the ministries and industry officials. (See appendix “Government Standards (*GOST*).”

During my time at the *SDB* I tried to keep a low profile and didn't aspire to any higher positions, because that would have meant being approved for access to secret information, which in turn would've exposed my own secret, my Israeli relatives. I was offered various positions several times, but each time I came up with some legitimate or fake excuse to decline it.

Since I was a member of the communist party, one of my new assigned duties was to conduct the so-called “*Politinformation*” sessions with the young *Comsomol* members of the *SDB*. [Basically it meant informing these members of the junior division of the communist party of local, national and world events.] During these sessions I usually just recited excerpts from newspapers clippings and added some humor, but never political jokes. The younger workers of the *SDB* grew to like me.

My main task at work was creation of various Government Standards, which could win monetary premiums according to the New Technology regulations. Each premium meant 10 to 350 rubles extra cash for many people especially the chief engineer and the director

of the *SDB*, who usually got the largest amounts. Then the money trickled down to those who actually worked hard to create this or that Standard. I have to say that working on Standard development was an interesting process as it brought me in contact with people from different industries. My understanding of the interrelation between the industries grew. However, every now and then there were paradoxical situations, especially when we had to claim world market superiority of our Standards and file technological and economical efficiency reports to receive our next premium. The Standard review process always meant drinking with people in charge of its approval.

When not developing new Standards at the *SDB*, I was commissioned to check different factories for compliance with the already existing government standards. During these review trips I saw many cases of noncompliance and, even more frequently, deliberate hypocrisy. For example, I recall one case at a branch factory of the Russian Federation Central Oil Supply Agency in *Armavir* where the weight standard in pipeline shutters production was not adhered to and the shutters were 0.5 kilogram heavier than standard. Another example of “creative” noncompliance was a practice by which a factory producing pipeline trench excavators used brand new industrial razorblades off another factory’s bulldozers. The bulldozer factory then claimed their razorblades as metallic refuse. That way both factories fulfilled their necessary production and refuse quotas using only one process. Such scheming was a way of life within the Soviet system.

Then the first wave of immigration from the USSR to Israel began. About nine of my Jewish colleagues at the *SDB*, some very capable engineers, left over the course of a few years. My dream was getting closer, but I waited for the access to secret information limitations to expire. My time limit countdown was dragging on from the moment of my demobilization from the Soviet army. But soon enough, I decided it was time to file my immigration paperwork.

There was a series of events leading up to my decision. In 1974, after 30 years of separation, I reunited with my brother Samuel when he and his wife Haya came to Moscow as Canadian tourists. I had already met Haya in 1964, but under complicated circumstances. That was an emotional meeting, full of excitement and fear. This time we met without KGB instructions.

We welcomed our dearest guests in our home and visited them in their hotel, the “Berlin (Savoy).” My cousin Victoria and almost all of my wife’s relatives came to meet my family. We talked all the time, at home, in the streets, even sightseeing in the Red Square. Now our conversations were mostly about immigration plans. We were interested in all aspects of this critical life decision; however my wife didn’t want to go. This became a serious issue. When Sam enthusiastically tried to persuade Marina to come to Canada as a whole family, she took it as propaganda and scared Sam and Haya. They stopped trying. Now they counted days till their departure afraid of talking about this again.

From this moment on life turned into a series of nightmares. I was determined to leave together with my family and asked Natan for an official invitation to Israel, which came without delay.

Now it was Marina’s turn to decide “whether to pack an umbrella or not.” (a Russian expression). Since we had a family invitation, all we had to do now is collect all necessary paperwork and file it.

Nightmares at home began the moment my brother and his wife left back to Canada. Marina claimed that she wasn't ready to make such a radical move. I was flabbergasted. I was convinced that my wife would make a positive decision knowing my past and seeing our present. But I was wrong. She looked for any excuse to delay the process. I was waiting for the day my security limitation would expire so I could file my immigration papers. Despite my wife's close-mindedness and stubbornness I tried, albeit in vain, to make her change her mind and immigrate with me. These conversations were long and exhausting. Those were some of the cruellest days of my life because my mind understood that I couldn't stay in this country, that after everything I'd been through I deserved a better life for myself and my family. Most of all, I wanted to have freedom to think and express myself and not be labeled as a second-class citizen. I didn't want to constantly encounter anti-Semitism any longer.

It's hard for me to convey the emotional burdens of those days, weeks, months. Sometimes, looking back I actually doubt that a person can really endure that much stress. My wife eventually made up her mind and refused to leave the Soviet Union. I was alone in my decision, and Marina had the support of her parents and relatives. These battles took place daily, until finally the question of divorce came up. Without divorce I wouldn't be allowed to leave. We fought till late at night. Every morning I got up and went to my English language classes. This nightmare lasted several months.

When Marina agreed to sign all the divorce papers in court, I thought my suffering was over. Wrong again. In court the issue was twisted in such a way that Marina changed her mind and the court date was pushed back a couple of months. Desperate, I lost control of myself.

Days dragged on and on, slowly and painfully. I was determined to go for "all or nothing" in order to achieve my dream of leaving this country, a country where there was no present and no future for a Jewish Holocaust survivor. I have to say that I was lucky though, because this was happening during the time of the famed "political thaw" and I was allowed to continue working in the *SDB*, although in a lower ranking position.

Despite the stifling atmosphere at home I was still hoping that my family would follow me. I was gravely afraid that if they didn't, I would never see them again; that the Iron Curtain would fall forever. To keep myself busy I enrolled in a paid English language study group. People there used to sing songs like "My Bonny is over the Ocean, my Bonny is over the Sea." But no one in our group knew who really was on their way "over the Sea."

Gradually there were less and less people in attendance. Then we started to reveal our common secrets, share valuable information about filing papers and dealing with the officials at the internal department of exit visas (*OVIR*). We also began hearing stories about those denied from the USSR and about their struggle for their right to move to Israel. Information was sparse and somber, which didn't exactly encourage those of us whose immigration documents were already in the system. To top it all off, I was having a really hard time at work as well. This very thorny road began with my petition to decline my communist party membership. ([See Petition](#)). At the local Party bureau hearing a Ph.D. candidate, Zimbler, who was Jewish (!), asked me a treacherous question. "Why didn't you mention your relatives abroad when you applied for a position at *SDB*?" My answer was that there was, "there was no question about it on the application." After

a brief discussion the members of the bureau decided to pass my case to the district Party committee. A date was set for another hearing in regard to my petition to cancel Party membership. Those days felt like eternity. I will remember forever the day of the final decision.

The district committee consisted of old Party sharks who routinely slept through the meetings and didn't ask questions. During my hearing the first Party secretary of the district dropped by, inquired about the process and concluded that I was leaving the country "on a mission for the Motherland..." Then I was successfully expelled from the Party and began waiting for news from *OVIR*. The atmosphere at work was grave.

Alexandrov, the chief engineer of the *SDB*, instructed the staff to completely ignore me. My colleagues, who once respected me greatly, now shunned me as if I had leprosy. Such was the atmosphere surrounding me from the time I applied for immigration to Israel, where my brothers lived, separated early on by the war against fascism. It's hard to imagine how much a person can really endure. I still wonder sometimes whether that was reality or just a dream. In certain ways, it would be more appropriate to call it a nightmare.

I kept on with my work, yet I couldn't help but wonder all the time whether my wife might change her mind so we could leave the country together. But, alas, it didn't happen.

Finally the day arrived! I got permission to leave the country where I spent the best years of my life – childhood and the period of becoming an independent family man. I was leaving the country where I knew first love and where my only daughter was born. I decided to forgo all the ties and memories in order to achieve my dream for myself and my family. I took a superhuman risk. I was not 100% sure of its outcome, but I knew deep inside that I had to take this risk if I were ever to achieve the impossible. Those were the most horrible days of my life. I was leaving home again, but this time voluntarily, on my own, without state interference. Oh, kind people, who can understand the cries of my soul? Is it possible to understand at all? My heart was breaking for I was an orphan yet again. I wanted to scream, but there was no one to hear me. The world was deaf and empty and the people... Everyone was preoccupied with their own sorrows. They had no time for mine.

The last days went by in hopes that my family would still go with me, but without success. Eventually, I packed a little suitcase and, perhaps pathetically left my home, leaving everything behind. Everything, everything, everything... I drove to the *Sheremetyevo* airport. My soul still cries as I write these words. I wonder when does one person have enough grief? Everything around me was empty. The world was just a void. As I headed for the plane, I said farewell to my wife and her mother, Rita Moiseevna. I wondered what she thought in that moment? Unfortunately she didn't live long enough to see that I still loved her daughter greatly, that my risks was not in vain, which I'm hoping to prove to you in the pages that follow.

## **Chapter Ten: Building a Future**

On board the plane I was completely abstracted, unaware of what was happening until the take off. When we reached cruising altitude, I wanted to scream: "Stop the plane. I want to get off. I forgot my family!" But of course, that was impossible. So I stared out that window, bewildered, at the tiny lights passing below, the lights of a country and a life that I had left behind.

The plane wasn't crowded and most people spoke Russian. The flight to Vienna, Austria took about two hours. When we landed in this new country, there were representatives of Israel, Jias and , waiting for us there. They asked me where I wanted to go and I, obviously, said Canada. All those who weren't en route to Israel were put on a bus and taken to an inn run by a Polish Jew named Betina. Her name became familiar to generations of Soviet immigrants. She was a very crafty woman. She used the harsh reality of immigration for her personal benefit. She bought caviar, festive flax clothing, decorative eggs made of semi-precious stones, everything and anything she could make money on. She bought it all for next to nothing from poor immigrants. She behaved like a Queen and eventually became a legendary figure among immigrants.

I roomed with an immigrant from Kiev, a fellow bachelor by the name of Garik. The procedures that followed were pretty standard. All the new immigrants gathered in Vienna Jias to fill out the paperwork. Since I spoke several languages I was asked to help with the translation. I was helping out an immigrant from Poland who had loaded up his Volkswagen and come to Vienna with a desire to stay there for good. Since he had a car, this encounter gave me an opportunity to see much of that wonderful city. Numerous writers and artists have praised its splendors. I was particularly impressed by the cleanliness of its streets, discipline of its citizens and abundance of everything in its shops. However one week is not enough to see such a great city. This week flew by fast and I was given papers for departure to Rome, Italy with a group of fellow immigrants. When our group arrived at the Vienna train station we had very little time to board the train and this unpleasant experience reminded me the hurried retreat of the Soviet troops and the Party elite from *Rokitno*. People were hectic, concerned about their luggage, numerous bags and suitcases of various shapes and sizes. I had it easy since I only had one small suitcase in my possession. I recalled a tune of the song: "Where is my little suitcase... etc." The whistle blew and we departed once again into the unknown. The train wheels played the same melody as on the night of my journey from Moscow to the Voronezh Suvorov Military School. The night trained quickly passed one station after another. Perhaps we were sent on a night train on purpose, so we won't be as visible, out of fear of terrorist attacks on our group. I couldn't fall asleep thinking over and over about everything that was happening to me. I also felt tremendous responsibility since I was chosen as a leader of the group and had to make sure that we all got off at the right station not far from Rome. Jias buses would be waiting for us there. The scheduled stop there was very brief and we had even less time to get off the train than we had to get on it. Suitcases and bags were being tossed right out the windows and roughly awakened children cried. Nevertheless, everything worked out fine. We boarded the buses and headed for Rome.

In Rome we stayed in several boarding houses, which were of a better quality than those in Vienna. We could only stay in these boarding houses while our paperwork was being processed in the Roman Jias. Sooner or later we had to look for our own housing. Using the advice of those who came before us, we found housing in *Ostia de Lido*. It was a small town on the Adriatic coast where prices were considerably lower than in Rome. Thus began my “Roman holiday.” I was lucky to find housing fairly quickly. It was a *Triremi* street apartment in *Ostia* right on the border of the communist and capitalist parts of town, christened as such by the immigrants. I once again shared a room with my Vienna companion. Without any hesitation I immediately began serious studies of English. I made daily train round trips to Rome to take classes there. I took these lessons very seriously because I knew that this will determine whether I will “make it or break it” in the New World.

Modern Italy is one of the most interesting of European countries, thanks to its geographical location, historic past, ancient culture and its role in today’s arts and politics. Having found myself in this wonderful country, I constantly thought about my family. I kept my faith in the triumph of reason and believed that eventually we’d be together. I felt a torn man, but I kept my faith in a brighter tomorrow. After my English classes, I rushed to the *Ostia* post office to call Moscow or send a small care package put together with savings from our little allowance.

I stayed in Rome for nine months. During this time I had a chance to see most of the famous sites of this country and learn a lot about its wonderful people. Since the end of the war, the Italian people achieved visible social progress without the Soviet-style productivity rush, competitions and mass mobilization, but only through their diligence and free will. Everyone worked where she/he wanted or was needed, in accordance with her/his skills, capabilities and potential.

After school and on weekends I roamed the city, indulging in its cultural riches. One cannot but admire “the heart of Rome” – Venice Square. The monument to the king *Victor Emmanuel II* towers over its southern side. The Venetian Palace crowns the eastern side and invokes the joyous spirit, which engulfed Italy when it became a united sovereign nation following centuries of internal conflicts.

I was particularly impressed with another ancient national treasure – the Coliseum. Today the massive carcass of the amphitheater continues to awe visitors with its size and solid construction. Another important place in Rome is the Vatican. It’s a country within a country, complete with its own government, ministries, post office, police, radio and other attributes of a sovereign nation. Some of our immigrants performed solo concerts there.

I recall the unforgettable *Villa Borgese*, its park created in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the museum with sculptures by Conova, Bernini, painting by Raphael, Danai.

I often sat by the Trivoli Fountain. This architectural wonder was built in 1762 based on drawings by Bernini. The name of the fountain stems from the Italian word “Trivoli,” which means “a crossroads of three streets.” The fountain composition features gods and fantastic creatures. Following the tradition, I threw a coin in the fountain hoping to come back to Rome again. I have kept this dream alive until today.

I tried to see as much of Rome as possible, but also to get a glimpse of the rest of the country. I visited such places as *Tivoli* and the archeological digs in *Ostia*, magical

Florence and Venice. I was greatly impressed with this country and its people. But despite all the beauty around me, I kept thinking about the family I left behind and my future new home in Canada. I believed there was a brighter future. That's what I desired and what I was fighting for. I pursued English with great enthusiasm and attended every single *Jias* lecture and class. I also attended meeting of a special group organized by the director of *Jias*, David Haris. He was a young, tall, fairly athletically built man. We had a really good relationship. Members of the group rotated hosting duties. We gathered in each other's apartments with the tea and cookies served over a conversation in English. Our conversations were about different topics and lasted from 7 p.m. till midnight. For this group David picked people himself. It was quite an interesting mix of folks from different cities across the USSR.

During my time in Rome, my brother Samuel paid me a visit, as did my oldest brother Natan, who came from Israel especially so that we could celebrate what was, understandably, an emotional family reunion for the first time in 33 years! During this meeting we talked about my family in Moscow and about our family destroyed by the fascists and their local supporters. Natan couldn't understand why my family didn't come with me since he invited the whole family. Immigration is a complicated psychological and physical process. It was obviously hard for my family as well. However, looking back on the years past, and analyzing the history of Jewish immigration, I am more and more convinced that my decision to immigrate was a right one.

My Roman holidays came to an end. The screening process for immigration to Canada was very thorough. It was time for medical evaluation and interviews with the second and first Canadian councilors. These procedures made me anxious, but I believed that soon I would be in this wonderful country. The famous Russian poet Vladimir Vysotsky wrote these words about Canada:

"This country is blessed by God,  
An Eldorado still not found, -  
It's so funny, - for here it is.  
Welcome to Canada! Welcome to Canada!"

On October 28, 1975, I landed in this blessed land, in Toronto, Ontario. After the immigration control at the airport, I found myself in my brother's arms. Samuel and his whole family were there to greet me. For the first time in my life, I got into a limousine and we drove to my brother's house along the longest street in the world, the Yonge Street. It stretches northward from Lake Ontario through the city of Toronto and continues as Highway 11 up to James Bay. It was evening and this wonderful street was full of neon lights and different shiny signs, which I couldn't quite make out or read just yet. My only regret was that my family couldn't see this beautiful display with me. It was like a dream. And, as if it wasn't already enough, I woke up in a luxurious house at 4 Shenston Street.

It's hard to convey all the emotions that I was experiencing at the time. Yes, it felt like a dream; the kind you don't want to wake up from. It was hard to believe that after everything I'd been through, happiness was still possible. Happiness was to finally be reunited with my brother – we were two boys who survived the Holocaust and were

separated for more than 30 years. On my first day in their home my brother's wife Haya started to cook and set the table for dinner. How wonderful the food tasted! We talked endlessly again, jumping from one topic to another. It seemed like there wouldn't be enough time to discuss everything. I felt tired and went to bed. But I was so wired with excitement that I thought I wouldn't be able to fall asleep. Surprisingly, I passed out within minutes.

Toronto is a city that is spread out over an area larger than New York City with a population of approximately 3 million. The city itself is only about a century and a half old so, by European standards, everything looks quite new. The downtown is wide and sprawling. At the center are the biggest skyscrapers, sleek and tall as they reach up to the sky, but as the downtown spreads out evenly in each direction the smaller buildings dominate and commercial businesses occupy storefronts in every block. As you move away from the central business core the real charm and strength of Toronto is revealed; the many neighborhoods that make up the city and support the tapestry of ethnic and racial groups that make Toronto one of the most multi-cultural cities in the world. It's been said that while the U.S. is a melting pot, Canada is cultural mosaic. Nowhere is this more evident than in Toronto. It is also a hard working city, the home to commerce from other parts of the country as well as internationally. I felt very much at home in the strong work ethic among many immigrants like myself.

The next morning marked a new day of a new life in a new house in a new country. I spent the first week filling out all the necessary paperwork such as OHIP (Government Medical Insurance) and SIN (Social Insurance Number) forms. Then I registered with JIAS and immediately enrolled in the English language course at Seneca College. My group, which consisted of predominantly Soviet immigrants, met daily. However, within two weeks I realized that this group's level was too low for me. Since I was paying for these classes myself I decided to find an advanced English as a second language group. I was accepted into such a group at Humber College, another Community College in Toronto. This group consisted mostly of immigrants from India, whose English was quite good, especially written English. There were also two people from Israel and myself.

Now I had no one to fall back into Russian with, whether I liked it or not. I was a very active participant in this group despite my many mistakes, especially in my writing. I was determined to learn the language as soon as possible so I could look for a job, preferably in the engineering industry. This college had career counselors who assisted students with their job search. One day, about half a month before the end of this three months long course, I was asked to come by a counselor's office. He told me about a position of an Industrial Engineer available at Fruehauf Trailer Company.

I went to the interview with great enthusiasm and, happily, I got the job. So a new chapter of my life began in the new world. Living at my brother's house I had to take three buses to commute to work by public transport. My new goal was to pass the driver's test and obtain a driver's license to make the commute easier. I must note that I quickly realized that no one would help me with my new job and that I had to learn everything myself. I studied everything I could about manufacturing of trailers and other products in my new company. The main function of my position was to develop standards of production for various auto parts used in the car platforms, trucks and vans assembled by our company.

Most of the time I had to calculate and measure the time needed and spent by the contractors for production of these parts.

The unions observed my work. Having built good relationships with the administration and my coworkers, I was able to quickly learn all of our merchandise and develop appropriate standards for their production. I systematized this information and created a database, which allowed me to quickly and efficiently answer questions posed by other departments. While working at this factory, I was also preparing to take my exams to confirm my diplomas and register as a professional engineer in Canada. Upon successful completion of the exams, I became a member of the Canadian Engineering Association. I was hoping for a promotion at work, but Lady Luck didn't smile on me just then. When there was a vacancy for the position of the technical department chief, it was given to someone who'd been working in the company longer than I was. I continued my work under the supervision of a fairly competent man, although he neither had college education nor was a professional engineer. Nevertheless, we had a nice relationship. He immediately recommended a salary raise for me and it was approved. However, after three years with this company I started thinking that perhaps it was time to change my place of work in hopes of better financial benefits. I needed more money to save up for my family, who I still believed would join me here one day, despite their unfortunate decision not to follow me now.

While I still working at this company I got in touch with the so-called "Headhunters"; commercial organizations who look for jobs for other people. And one day I got a phone call from them with an offer to take a Senior Industrial Engineer position at a company called TRW. The salary was considerably bigger. I was awarded this position. I had a new job again and a new set of coworkers and a new challenge to survive, although this time it wasn't a matter of life and death. My new company was producing technologies and know-how for manufacturing and assembly of car radio tuners. We created mini production lines for a pilot run to test the technology before launching mass production in Haiti where the cost of labor was very cheap. With great enthusiasm I studied every detail of the newly developed tuner. The most important thing for me was to learn all the terminology of the radio parts and the production process in English. To achieve this goal I took apart one radio tuner and glued its individual parts on cardboard posters with the name and serial number of each part signed underneath it. Then I simply memorized the whole chart. The second challenge was to develop the production standards for it. The prototype for our tuner was a Japanese model, which our engineers tried to modify and somehow make cheaper. However, during the modification process they missed a tiny spring part, which caused the new model to fail all the tests. I discovered this missing link when I was memorizing all the parts off the cardboard charts. My discovery fixed the problem and soon the project was successfully finished.

I lived with my brother for six months, but eventually the time came to find my own housing and live independently. Everything is good in moderation. I quickly found a one-room studio apartment and moved to my new dwellings. I furnished it with a few furniture pieces, which were given to me by my brother and nephew. So began my life as a lonely bachelor in Canada. All my thoughts were focused on a goal of getting my family to come to this wonderful country as soon as possible. I ceaselessly wrote endless letters, but it was hard to explain to my wife that she had to take this step primarily for

the sake of our daughter's future. History is my witness that my efforts and perseverance eventually paid off.

I continued to work hard and save money to buy my own house. In my free time I started studying the real estate market. One day my nephew called and told me that there was a new housing development being built on the corner of Steels and Bathurst streets, a site that was at the very north western edge of the city of Toronto in a suburb called Thornhill. They were selling houses-in-progress in that area. After two visits to the real estate office I made an offer on one of those houses and put down a deposit of \$12,000 in savings. The house cost was \$60,000 so I had to get it mortgaged.

Although it may seem strange, I had to learn what a mortgage was and how it worked, because it was a completely new procedure for me. There was no such thing as a mortgage in the Soviet Union with a socialist economy. As the house was being built, I waited impatiently for news from Moscow and continued my hard work to pay off the mortgage more quickly. To secure a better salary, I changed my job again and took on the position of a manufacturing engineering manager at Chalmers Suspensions International, division of ARMBRO Materials & Construction Limited.

## **Chapter Eleven: In a New Country**

After five years of separation and uncertainty my family made the most reasonable decision to finally come to Canada. I filed all the paperwork and waited for a happy family reunion, which happened on the joyous day of January 31, 1980.

My brother, his family and I went to the airport. After the regular customs check, my wife and daughter were finally in my arms. This time I drove my family to our own house. Before their arrival Samuel, his family, my older brother Natan, who was visiting at the time, and I tried to make the house as comfortable and cozy for my family as we could, getting new furniture, dishes, and various little homey things that would contribute to their comfort and ease in this new environment. I must confess that I also wanted to impress them with my security and relative material wealth.

So my dream of many years had come true. My family was finally with me in the fresh, affluent land of Canada. We started life anew. During the first few days we filled out all the paperwork required of the new immigrants. Since I've already done that before, we finished that part quickly. Now it was family's turn to study hard. They enrolled in the ESL school and actively pursued the language. My daughter already had a solid base of English, but never had an opportunity to practice the language. Her goal was to settle as soon as possible for continuation of her academic studies. She applied to the computer studies department at New York University. Since she finished high school with honors, after an interview she was accepted to NYU with conditional additional language training. Meanwhile, Marina diligently continued to study English at George Brown College.

In 1980 I started working as a Production Manager at Titan Proform Company Limited. My responsibilities and salary grew annually. Every job I ever had had its own positive and negative sides. But the most important thing was that my material and financial status was growing stronger as I gained local experience in different industries. In all subsequent job interviews I could proudly say that yes, I have Canadian work experience. In contrast to Soviet job search experiences, in Canada no one ever asked me about my ethnicity or age because it was illegal. So I was no longer subject to "paragraph five denial" of employment. Our life in Canada was getting more and more normal and comfortable. My dream of raising a family in this blessed country had become my true happiness after years of struggles and suffering. This simple fact proves that she/he who fights for her/his future can indeed attain happiness. Of course life in Canada is not always as smooth as some people across the ocean might perceive it. But the most important thing is that here one can truly sing a famous Soviet song: "My native country is wide... Where everyone breathes so freely..." You have to do only one thing – work diligently and with honesty. So I worked hard for my family's future.

Working at the factory as a Production Manager I gained experience of working on launching new products, working with strong unions and multicultural staff. I participated in the hiring and firing processes. During my work I had to make decisions both technical and personal to ensure high quality completion of orders on time. I worked hard, and in due time I became successful. Despite my evident progress, or perhaps due to it, I also got enemies, who didn't want me to succeed and tried to make it impossible for me to do so. In the beginning I might have taken "a general's job," but I didn't have

my own faithful troops. In time I started hiring people who I knew I could count on. I also began breaking down some of the group habits, which existed before me and in my opinion hurt our productivity. Those were hard conditions to work under and so I was fired for no reason whatsoever. Such termination of contract was not justified and I received a settlement as a result of a court decision. This monetary compensation was of little importance to me. What was important was that I proved my point. It was an important legal case, because an immigrant sued a multimillionaire owner of a company and won. Recalling such life episodes in this new country, I couldn't help but compare it to my thorny path in the USSR and wonder, "Is this for real?"

Having lost a job, I was committed to finding a new one, but this time I was more confident and my English was much better. Shortly thereafter I was offered a position in the oil industry, which was much closer to my education and experience back in the USSR. After the initial interview in Toronto I was called in for the second interview in Calgary. I flew out there with great enthusiasm. On this trip I saw for the first time the magical Rocky Mountains region. It was breathtaking!

I got the position, but my family didn't want to move again. I agreed with them and continued to look for work in Toronto. In January 1982 I got an offer to join the Work Wear Company as a Corporate Plant Engineer. This company was basically one the largest laundry service on North America with a network of offices throughout Canada. These branches were well equipped with modern technologies. My job was to oversee the entire network, particularly paying attention to equipment upgrades for more efficient filtration of chemicals out of the water used for washing industrial loads of uniforms. I was also responsible for bringing down the noise levels in the laundry spaces, energy conservation programs as well as inventory of all company equipment. After a year with the company I got a raise and thought there was no reason to worry, but life sometimes turns its dark side towards us. Here is what happened to me in this company:

My boss was Frank Kolotar, a Hungarian refugee, who climbed the company ladder all the way to the top without engineering education. However, the walls of his office were covered with diplomas from various courses and lectures, which he frequently took and which lasted sometimes only a day. So he decided to hire a recent college graduate instead of me. This young guy was a son of Kolotar's good friend and coworker. One fine Friday, thinking he could do whatever he wanted and disregarding possible consequences, he simply handed me a letter saying there were no more projects for me to work on. He must've forgotten that it was him who initially hired me full-time. I had experience fighting injustice, so I took him up on his offer to write me a letter of recommendation, a positive reference. (See letter.) Within a few days I sued the company for wrongful dismissal. The process began with the usual paperwork and cross-examinations by both sets of lawyers. Such struggles in life are tough, but if you're fighting for your right to be treated fairly, they actually give you strength. What was the outcome of this fight?

Once again, I prevailed and was awarded another financial settlement. Armed with Canadian work experience and knowledge of the judicial system, I realized it was time to open my own business and not slave for someone else. My first move was to get a real estate sales license. With my license I started a new chapter in my work history, which best would be described by a Russian proverb, "It is the wolf's legs that keep his belly

full.” This job as a real estate agent taught me a lot about such aspects of human relationships as loyalty, honesty, and ethics – and that they all had their positive and negative sides.

My beginnings in this new industry were not easy, because the entire national real estate market went down. Given the state of the economy, I decided to wait a while and got a job as a Plant Manager at Food Machinery Engineering. I learned about a different business there, namely equipment for bakeries. Soviet immigrants constituted almost 60% of the factory staff. The rest were mostly from Vietnam, Poland, Jamaica and some other countries. Once I had an issue with a Jamaican worker from the painting department. He didn’t comply with the schedule of equipment painting. After three warnings and numerous pleas to work faster and not violate security codes by smoking in prohibited places, he started to threaten me physically and so I had to fire him. Within a few days he filed a complaint with state department on the grounds of discrimination. He already had a similar case pending in regard to another company. As a result of a year long investigation, I was backed by 16 testimonies of workers from different cultures and finally cleared of his accusations. I was proved right once again.

In 1985 I began working as a real estate sales associate at Allan Brown Real Estate (Ontario) Limited. It was a rather successful year in terms of sales. Since I had some sales experience already, I sold many houses and made good money. But this type of business didn’t really interest me and so I decided to invest in buying land and building housing developments. My future partner and I decided to open our own construction company and called it Alvi Homes. We started out with just two houses, but the construction and sale of both of them was extremely successful.

With more experience in construction, we started looking for new clients. This time we found a customer who wanted his current house completely renovated and expanded to 4500 sq. Ft. ([See photo.](#))

Right around that time we were preparing to welcome my wife’s sister’s whole family (five people) to Canada. Prior to this move, there were years of persuasion, a reconnaissance mission by Vera Zeitlina, my sister-in-law, who came to our daughter’s wedding. Then later her husband and daughter visited with us as well. Finally, ice broke and we got a letter from Vera saying that they were ready to immigrate to Canada.

After that, as our expertise in house construction grew, we expanded our project to ten houses. My partner and I did very well on that endeavor. After that success I let up somewhat on my commercial endeavors. I still worked as a builder, but it became a little easier and the pressure wasn’t as great. I had achieved a degree of financial stability in Canada that I had never thought possible! I had worked very hard all my life, mostly only to survive in the best way I could. There was satisfaction in this, of that there can be no doubt. But now, my history lay like an open book. It confronted me more and more as I wished, as I had wished when I was only a boy, that I could do something to help others to prevent a horror like the Holocaust from ever happening again. They say, “Those who ignore their history are destined to relive it”. This principle haunted me and I finally did something about now that I was essentially retired and had time and energy.

I began to work for non-profit organizations related to the Holocaust and finally broke my long standing silence about my terrible but somewhat historic experiences. This was quite difficult. It took effort and even a certain kind of courage to talk to strangers about

my experiences during the war. Nevertheless, I became a public speaker, going into schools and other organizations to share and to inform. It finally became important to let the young generation know what had happened first hand, if for no other reason so that they could hear about the horror and feel some sense of pride about some of our survival. In the course of a varied and sometimes difficult life I had become a rather successful entrepreneur, but who would have thought it? Although it may not be the rags-to-riches story of the century, it seems quite remarkable. I was a little boy when the home and security and love that a family can provide was brutally vanquished. I can't help but relive my time in the forest, which gave me, paradoxically, a spiritual side. I see, in my mind's eye, the towering trees whenever I am turned inward. I see the wolves also, their eyes glowing evil in the dark. I take no credit for my career success or long sought after security. It is the result of a meaningful, challenging and sometimes seemingly hopeless life. I am satisfied with this. I learned, first hand, that my family is so important. At the very least I can positively say, there is some order to this life. No one need finally despair.

## **Chapter Twelve: Our Journey to the Places under the Yellow Stars .**

As I spoke to people about what had happened during the war years in Europe, and as I began to relive painful memories of my childhood, I slowly became more desperate to have answers to my questions and to find a way to ease the pain. In my talks I was giving information to many people, but my own emotions were not still. Now a Canadian citizen, a world away from there I grew up, I felt like I was split in two. One part of me was empty and hurt and European. The other part was more whole and fulfilled and living in Canada. I began to think about returning to Europe, to see the places where my youth had been spent and to finally calm, perhaps, some of the desperate emotions that lived inside of me.

In the back of my mind I understood that visiting Rokitno in 1995 would be a lot like visiting a museum of lost civilization. Our journey would be a search for a vanished Jewish world. The Polish and Ukrainian people had continued to live as they had for generations, but the Jews who lived there for thousands of years have left no trace. For us it was a dilemma; could we make a journey to that vanished world? Our childhood was stolen; would it be possible to somehow get a piece of it back? This idea was driving us all the time. By going there perhaps we shall discover same photographs, artifacts, some witnesses of our loved ones. Although I ached to return, I also secretly resented going back to Rokitno. It was, for me, a place that represented something I can only call meaninglessness, haunting my emotions with feelings of indifference rather than of passionate hatred and fear. Perhaps my memories were protecting my emotions from disaster? Despite these difficult feelings I knew that I wanted very much to go.

After many years of discussion and debate, my brother Samuel and I finally decided that we felt not only that we should see our birthplace, but also that we should see our childhood home for the sake of our families and, quite simply, the entire generation that knew little about what had happened there.

We made inquiries about returning to the area and learned that there were structured visits arranged at specific times. In 1995 we were fortunate to join a group of Israelis with roots in Rokitno. They consisted of survivors, their spouses, children and grandchildren. This had become a yearly pilgrimage organized by the Association of Former Residents (and their descendants) of Rokitno and its surroundings. With mixed emotions Samuel, members of his family and I made arrangements to join a trip.

I arrived in Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, a few days before my brother, his family, and the Israeli contingent. In Kiev I spent time with my school mates from the Voronezh Cadet School: Fred Zolotkovsky, Vladimir Beliaev, Boris Poliansky and others. Our reunion was very emotional and interesting, we talked about our years in the cadet school, and our conversations even encompassed the metaphysical topic of the meaning of life itself. We visited the infantry school, the cemetery where the parents of Fred Zolotkovsky are buried, and in the evening we visited Fred's cousin, Lena. She was extremely hospitable and she made a party for my friends and I. This party evolved in the Russian tradition: a lot of food, vodka and speeches regarding my visit and our mutual friendships. This was a very warm evening, and it nostalgically reminded me our youth, our lost school mates and teachers. I invited Fred to join us and to familiarize himself with the town of our childhood. He accepted our invitation.

In two days, my friend I went to the airport to meet my brother and his family. The group from Israel, arriving earlier, boarded the bus, and left for Rokitno. Meanwhile, my brother and I, together with his family, boarded two cars and embarked on the long ride to Rokitno, a journey of about 260 kilometers. On our way I talked with the chauffeur, and Samuel was talking to his children. This ride was a definite pleasure. Samuel prepared his family for their arrival in this almost mythic place with stories and important information. They were being educated, both intellectually and emotionally, for an emotional visit. On our arrival we were welcomed by Nina Ivanovna Chiruk, former vice-mayor of Rokitno, and also the group from Israel. We were invited to a restaurant and then to the hotel "Dubok".

After a short rest we began walking the streets of our town beginning with the railway station that had not changed much even in all these years. The cattle cars that we saw, which were on display and have been placed as a memorial, are identical to those that transported people who were still alive after the shooting in the market place. We walked to the ruins of our street, Pilsutskego. This was the road we walked to our school before the war. We passed the crossing of the railway, we saw the bridge over the small river, then we passed the house of Mr. Nachtman, where we had collected fruit when we were small. We remembered the pear tree with the juicy pears. It is hard to describe my feelings at that moment, but I talked to my friend, Fred, and described our life, which helped me to express rather complex emotions. He started writing poems about his feelings in sympathy with my memories since he was deeply moved by the story.

**On Day Two** we went for a meeting with the local government. We listened to their report regarding the development of their region and some of the Israelis spoke about our reasons for coming to the shtetl; to respect the lost community, and to visit the places where our childhood years passed. In conclusion I made my speech. It is reprinted here::

Ladies and Gentleman!

I will start my speech by quoting one of the well known Russian movie producers, Sava Kulish: "My generation is the last generation of the war generation, of children of the war. We are the last generation with whom the facts, reality and personal knowledge about the war times disappears. Our childhood experience is also a valuable fortune in history, the same as knowledge of the adults about the war times. Our bitter knowledge will disappear forever, if we do not secure it in films, books, art."

My generation experienced a war at the most sensitive age. During the past 50 years since the war we have all become adults. More than that, we came to the conclusion that, the more often we turn around and try to evaluate the past the more true it becomes. Only if we understand the past can we accept correctly the present and forecast of the future and that this is only to be achieved by our children, and our grandchildren.

Our children and grandchildren will live in the future. Without them we will not have a new generation. But it is very painful to think that mistakes, for which we paid so very dearly, can be repeated. 54 years after the Second World War started, the war that destroyed millions of human lives. In this big wave of history was our family. In escaping from the fascists, we, the inhabitants of Rokitno, hid in a dense Ukrainian forest and the mud of Polecie fields. We saw cruelty and kindness, hunger and cold, but youth and aspiration to life gave us the strength to survive. We have come together today to remember our parents, brothers and sisters. They were innocent victims killed and they did not have the opportunity to develop their potentials and see and enjoy the achievements of their children and grandchildren. Therefore, for the sake of a peaceful future, **Children of war cannot be silent!**

**On day three** we went to the Jewish cemetery. There we found several new gravestones and many old ones. The cemetery was newly fenced and had a gate. The new gravestones were of those Jews who came to the town after the war and have since died. We lit memorial candles and recited 'Kel Malle Rachamim'. We now had a connection to the

past. The only Jews still left in the town are the dead ones. Samuel and I searched throughout the cemetery for graves of our grandfather, but we were unsuccessful. Nearby there is a mass grave of those who were massacred in the market square or were killed in the swamp by the collaborators for one kilogram salt. We held a memorial ceremony. It was a deeply meaningful moment; we all dissolved into tears. We draped the Israeli flag over the gravestones and a special Kaddish was recited. My school mate Fred Zolotkovsky expressed his feelings at this mass graveside in his poem:

**“Jewish Cemetery, Rokitno”-1995:**

“ There it is, the Old Jewish Cemetery  
Row upon row, and every weathered stone  
is a memory, and a plate of grief.  
Yes, here tells of the executions, there the pogroms  
and the fires of hate that were lit.  
These are holy places, these graves of our ancestors.  
Look here! A sister. Beyond! A brother  
in clattered disarray. It is impossible to find  
parent and grandparents. Broken stones,  
scattered bones. Friends. All in one tomb now.  
In time dust will consume it  
and it will disappear anyway.  
Great clouds are spreading low over the horizon  
and the atmosphere is almost electric.  
All of us here are pained and distressed.  
On one of the stones we saw a Star of David,  
but the name and date could not be read. Just a stone  
erected through the centuries.  
That stone represents thousands of years,  
Forever it represents the faith of our fathers  
and countless fathers before them.  
That faith was never bent nor struck.  
Change was not in our nature.  
Obstinacy was always our protector.  
This cemetery, this is our history.  
It is God's hand.  
Let us all stand around the graves today  
and we will recite Kaddish  
in memory of our fathers.  
Maybe we will all be purified  
without loud and significant words.”

**On Day Four** we went to through the village of Netreba to Okopy, a Polish Catholic village which was completely destroyed by the Ukrainians nationalists. Only the cemetery remains. This was the area where my brother and I and others had hidden in the forest nearby. One local peasant told us what had happened in this village. He happened

to know about our hiding place in the deep forest, but he explained that our cave was distorted and to go to this place was not possible, because it was filled with water now. He told us the story of the local Polish priest (ksondz), Ludwika Wrodarczyka and Felicja Masojada, a Polish teacher, who were both brutally murdered. He also told us that the son of Mrs. Masojada was alive and living in Warsaw. My brother and I, remembered the time during our search for shelter when we were wandering from village to village. We recalled coming to Okopy. After being turned away by many, we came to a house on the outskirts of the village. We knocked on the door and when it opened , we begged for food.

Ludwik, the priest, was visiting Felicia at that time, and they told us that there was a search for Jews being conducted by police in the area. To protect us they hid us in the closet. After the search was over, they gave us food and sent us to the forest since it was not safe to stay in the village. After we found shelter in the forest and created the cave, we went back to Felicia's house a few times for food and clothes. From this moment, when we knew her son was alive, we started searching through many Polish Catholic missionaries and finally we established a contact with Edmund Masojada, We were instrumental in obtaining for these heroic people the title of "Righteous Among the Nations", who risked their lives to save Jews. They were awarded by Yad Vashem with a specially – minted medal and a certificate of honor and the privilege of their names being added to those on the Righteous Wall of Honor at the Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. (see enclosure).

On the way back to the hotel “ Dubok” we were invited to the high school to meet the teachers. There we had a discussions about different subjects, and since Miriam David , my brothers daughter, is a teacher from Toronto Canada, she is the one who had the main questions. Then we stopped at Moshe Trossmans's childhood home. We still could find marks of the mezusa. on the door frame.

**On Day five** we rode to Sarny. This is where eighteen thousand Jews from surrounding towns and villages were murdered. We got off the bus near a football stadium that was built over the old Jewish cemetery. We crossed the train tracks and we followed the road our people had walked to their mass grave. There was my father, his brother and sisters. This story has been written in a book by a survivor who manage to escape by hiding in a pile of clothing. There are three memorials, three mountains of bones covered with sand. We held a memorial ceremony once again. ( [see photo](#)). And this tour was described by Fred in his poem:

#### **“Route to death”:**

“ I went through a route of death,  
but I am alive, I am still alive.  
To hell went elderly and children,  
my nation I am walking in bitter tears,  
why only Jews received so many death?  
What we did bed to the civilization?  
Does not God hear us?  
Why at the holy nation  
fire reality did not extinguish?”

We came back to the town and stopped at the market square. My brother tried to recreate the horrible day our mother and brother were killed. He described to his children the separation of the families, the shouting of a women that a slaughter was about to happen, the chaos and the running crowd. Then Samuel crossed the road and showed them the house were we ran, where my brother had been working. It was a chilling feeling, and Samuel's grown children were clearly emotional. He explained how quickly we ran away, from the back door, out and under the railway cars that had been prepared for all of the community to be transferred to the Sarny pits. He described how we ran farther, to the bushes and into the dense forest surrounding our town.

In the evening we were invited by the local government to the restaurant. That evening we witnessed an intense rain that began to fall. We felt the heavens were crying as our fallen were remembered. Since in the town there was no sewage system in the town the water was rising very high and the locals were complaining that the government was doing nothing to develop this place.

The table was set up with food and vodka. The orchestra greeted us with Ukrainian and Hebrew songs. This was a Shabbat evening. We lit the candles and prayed.

Speeches were made by the city authorities and teachers, and then my brother made his speech:

" Dear Holocaust survivors, Honored guests from Rokitno, my wife and children. My name is Samuel Levin. I was born in 1925 in the town of Rokitno, 70 years ago. I grew up and spent 17 years of my life there. We lived a simple life. My father worked hard and we were poor. We were 4 children. I remember that some Fridays there was not enough food to prepare for the Sabbath. In spite of it all we lived as a happy family with our parents. Suddenly in 1942 we became orphans. We gathered in the market square where the Nazis and the collaborators began to shoot, to hunt the runaways and load into the railway cars. They brought these cars to Sarny where all of them were killed including our father. He was murdered there, together with many others, without compassion.

From the loud screaming and the crying in the market square that day, I saw the sky open up and I looked for our God to save us. It did not happen, and from then until now I believe that such a God does not exist. My mother and my five year old brother did not escape to the forest and they found only their death . My brother Sasha, who is here today, and myself successfully escaped to the forest. We struggled through a torturous path that is difficult to describe because I myself cannot believe how we were able to go through it. I remain troubled today with the question I asked then. WHY?

I don't want to make this evening too sad, too emotional. I want to forget the past, but it is difficult. I tell you this story because my heart is aching and I cannot even cry – I have no tears left. I waited more than 50 years to come back to the place where I was born and reunite with my dear parents who are gone. I just had to finally unburden my heavy heart. I want to thank all those people who organized this trip especially Yisachar and Moshe Trossman and all the others who helped. Thank you."

Then my school mate Fred Zolotkovsky made his speech:

"Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Memory is one of the valuable beginnings. They are in any situation opportunities which allow everybody to remain as human beings in the full sense of this meaning. In these memorable days we visited the monuments of the perished in August 1942 in Rokitno and Sarny. Your relatives and close friends , they were killed only because they were Jews. This is monstrous. This is frightening. This was the black and bloody page in our life. One of the morals is that even the horror and the grief purifies us morally and in spirit. Without doubt, all the victims and their incredible spirit and memory about them bring us together and make it a more solid nation and more harmonious. Do other nations not wonder about the people who survived that horrible time, the Jews who survived – we memorialized them like hero's – we admire also these Ukrainians, Poles and white Russians that did not sell their spirit to the devil. They remained, under the German occupation, human. This is the thought and feeling I want to express in my poems.”

### **Chapter Thirteen: The Inextinguishable Candles of the Holocaust.**

It is customary in our lives to do some soul searching regarding our past, our trials and tribulations, as well as our achievements and current agenda. This applies not only to individuals but also to public groups and organizations in reviewing their responsibilities and commitments to present day tasks and future activities.

We all came away from a tragic universe of death and destruction with scars that will never fully heal. Looking back to earlier years, we were strangers when we arrived on this continent. People looked at us with suspicion about our survival when millions of others had perished. In most cases, we kept our memories to ourselves. The surrounding public, Jewish and non – Jewish did not show any special interest in our past or our problems.

The world wanted to forget the Holocaust and not be burdened by our tragic experience. It was the survivors who stood at the forefront and challenged the world to remember. We began the commemorations, memorial pilgrimages to the sites of the death camps and Mobile Killing Units, which were followed by the establishment of ghettos, “liquidation” of the ghettos and finally deportation to the death camps and killing pits.

We, the survivors, recognize one group of people endowed with a unique humanity qualifying them as the conscience of the world: the Righteous Gentiles. Small in number and steadily dwindling, they are the beacon toward the light of which humans should strive, including us.

We are the proof to the deniers, we are the living witness to the past.

The slogan “Remember” was repeated loud and clear at every occasion, urging others to join in the sacred task of remembrance. Yes, we were busy rebuilding our shattered lives in the new world without becoming a burden to society. No one celebrated our newly attained freedom. Our commemorations were mostly attended by survivors. We remember the moving “Plea For The Survivors,” by Elie Wiesel who pleaded our case

with outstanding eloquence. He said: “ if we forget, we shall be forgotten. If we remember, then they will remember us”.

The commandment of “ Remember” has remained with us always as a sacred mission to ourselves and in memory of our martyrs. Throughout our new lives, we have kept it sacred and effective. Finally organized groups of survivors took upon themselves the task to commemorate, document and educate people about the greatest calamity that befell European Jewry, of which we are the survivors and witnesses.

Myself, personally, was encouraged by a Holocaust survivor Robert Engel from the Holocaust Center of Toronto to be a volunteer. From that day I devoted myself to speaking at the Center, to religious and secular school classes, university students, over eight years.

When I speak to the students, it is very rewarding to see their eyes fill with tears and compassion. Their response to me is often a thank you letter, a warm hug. I received hundreds of letters each year from visitors to the Holocaust Center or from visited schools and libraries. I would like to share some of them.

“Tuesday March 5, 2002

Dear Alex! We thank you for being so generous. You have given us a gift of knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust through your personal experience. We appreciate this rare opportunity, and we are truly honored to have you here. We will not forget, and we will tell your story, so that our children will also learn about the Holocaust. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Shana Brosyi, Lisa Henneman. Markham District High School.”

“December 12, 2000

Dear Mr. Levin

.....my name is Valentina Cabeldu and I was the girl who cried while you were telling us your story. I am writing to you because that day when you told your personal story you moved my heart. .....Thank you for your strength in life and your knowledge of living. People of your nature allow people like me want to enjoy life ever more because you made me see with my heart what people had to endure.....”

“ May 2000

Dear Mr. Levin

Thank you so very much for taking the time to speak to my students. We are so blessed to have met you. It was an honor, indeed. Just being in your presence was an honor. You are kind, compassionate and an amazing speaker with a beautiful sense of humor. You are indeed a survivor.....We are blessed to have heard you speak. We learned so much from you and we will always remember you and your words.

God bless you, always. Sincerely, Lina De Luca, Teacher. York Memorial C. I”

“October 22, 2002

Dear Mr. Alex Levin

I know it's hard walking down the “memory lane” because it's very painful. But I want to personally thank you for sharing your story to me. It was a privilege to be able to learn about history from someone who had been there.....your story made me realize how lucky I am to be living in a peaceful world. Thank you very much.....

I am really happy that you now live here in Canada and was able to start a new life. God bless you and your Family. Sincerely, Gredaline Teves. (gr.11. Ms. Gobbis class), Father Michael Goetz Secondary School.”

“November 2,2000

Dear Mr. Levin

Just a note to thank you sincerely for your presentation at our library on October 31. The teachers and Grade 6 students from Bayview Glen Public School were most impressed with you talk. It is very important for young people to hear about the Holocaust at first hand, so they can hear the answer to the question, “Did it really happen?” from someone who lived through it. I can appreciate how hard it must be at times to retell events, but you obviously have the same conviction, that the story must be told.....

It was good to see that some adults came along independent from the class to hear you speak – and what a surprise to see your confrère from the forest!

I wish you the best of luck with your book; the library would be interested in hearing when it is published so we could acquire a copy.

Sincerely, Sharon Philip, Supervisor, Children's Services, Thornhill Community Centre Library.”

In 2002, I was asked to join the March Of The Living (MOL) college program as a Holocaust survivor. My unique mission in this hard and sensitive task was a significant event in my history. I have to light the inextinguishable candle of the Holocaust. This was an opportunity to travel with students to Poland and Israel. This was a once-in-a lifetime experience during which I shared moments of sadness and joy that created long lasting bonds. Here are some of the ideas and feelings expressed by Samantha Peller after she returned home, to NY, from our trip. “I wanted to share a song I wrote a few months after returning from the trip about my experience in Poland. One of the concentration camps we visited, Majdanek, had a barrack that housed cage upon cage of shoes of Holocaust victims.” And she concluded the song “Shoes”.

“This little children have lost their shoes

And lost their lives and yet

Their tiny little shoes remain

shoes reminding us all to never forget.”

The students have shared with me the encounter with Polish young people, students from different universities. “These non-Jewish students made it their mission to meet and talk to Jewish students their age in order to bridge the gaps dividing them, especially after the

history of extreme experience. As we got to know the Polish students, they seemed very similar to us. They liked the same movies and music, their families and their values and their goals are the same as ours and although they told us that many of their grandparents were alive and living in Poland during the Holocaust and still had a strong dislike towards Jews, these students tried to encourage their grandparents to think differently and made it their goal to do so. It was so interesting when we went to see the movie the “Pianist” in Poland with Polish students and hear their reaction.”

The big impression was made in Poland by the speech of the son of the Polish teacher Edmund Masojada, about the priest Ludwik Wrodarchuk and his mother Felicja Masojada who saved me and my brother during the search for run away Jews from the market place in Rokitno. This meeting left a lasting memory for all group.

The MOL is an International Educational program that brings teenagers to many key places where the tragic events took place. In Poland we visited concentration camps; Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka and Majdanek and also historic Jewish sites; the Warsaw Ghetto, old cemeteries. We lit the candles, we cried and we prayed. It was a powerful, emotional experiences for the all group of teenagers from the USA and Canada. They will be able to educate their peers about the Holocaust and to fight those who would deny its history, while forging a dynamic link with Israel. For them it will be a journey from darkness to light. For me it was marching toward Birkenau carrying the flag of Israel that was very significant, first of all for encouraging the young generation to remember the departed and give them the dignity they deserved, and to know that this was not the end of the Jewish People. ([See photo](#)).

These students have joined a chorus asking me to publish my memoirs.

One such student was Craig Dershowitz, a writer and who has served as editor of my book. He told me, “It is imperative that your story be written with as much care, accuracy, respect and power as possible. I hope that by putting your story into a book you might relieve some of your burden and some of your pain.”

Upon my return I pledge to continue my activity in telling my story for my perished mother, father and young brother. **They can't speak. So I must speak!**

## **Chapter fourteen: Search for my family Tree.**

My personal research into my family connection was a hard task. I have to establish my own genealogical file. My aim was to establish my Jewish ancestry and I want to live a record for my grandchildren. I started my work from the very little that I remember to the unknown, one small step at a time. I work from the present to the past, gathering facts from the elderly generation who survived the Holocaust, I checked the Polish archives, I collected pictures, I interview my relative in Israel, Brazil, Canada, Russia, USA.

But I was dreaming of flying off to far-away places to the places under the Yellow stars, to my town Rokitno were my childhood was and to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors. Me and my brother we took our five day independent tour to visit our shtetl Rokitno. Our

goal was to ensure that our search is completed and we will preserve our history for future generation.

**The Levin** ( Lewin ) family come from the town of Rokitno, Volyn. In the town one thirds of whom were Jewish. It had a market place in its centre, a few main streets, and many small side streets. Many of the Jews traded in grain, wood, hides, and some exported dry mushrooms and hop for beer. The others worked in various trades and crafts, earning their livelihood from people in surrounding villages and towns ( Sarny, Rovno, Kovel, Lutsk., Koretz, Lokachy.....). It was a Jewish town (so call Shtetl) with Jewish characteristics, an orthodox and observant places ( two synagogues).

The town was located on a border with the USSR, the last railway station on the Polish, Russian border. My grand grandfather (from my fathers side) reb Shraga Faivish Levin was a Rabbi and Shoihed (ritual slaughterer) in Rokitno village, and continued to do so when moving to Rokitno – city.

My Grandfather in 1913 Sheftl Levin was chosen to go to Eretz Israel to buy land on behalf of the Jews of Rokitno who planned to move there.



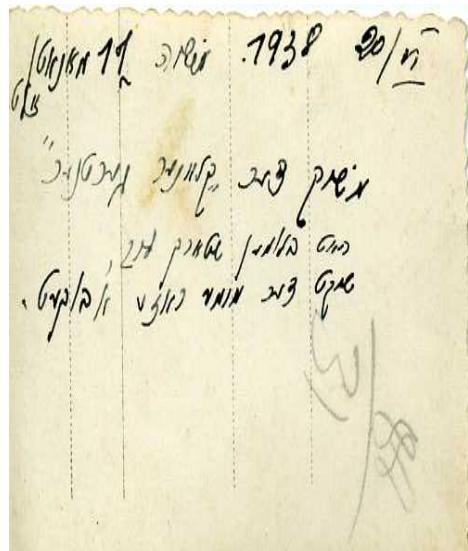
Grandfather: Sheftl Levin



Our parents: Mindl Barengoltz & Mordechai Levin



Three Brothers in Toronto-1988. From left:Joshua, Samuel, Natan.



Our brother: Moshe

Translation: 20/VI,1938 Moshe, 11 month old

We send the “small gardener”.

He likes the flowers very much.

He is sending Aunt Rosa a bouquet.

**The Barengoltz family** (from my mothers side) come from a village of Kupichev (Kupiczow), region of Kovel, Volyn. I remember in the middle of this village an orthodox church. In this village was a Jewish and Czech communities. I visited Kupichev with my aunt Rosa, when she visited me in Vladimir - Volynsky. At this time the Jews were killed in the Holocaust and the Czech people all went back to Czechoslovakia.



Our mother's family in Kupichev/ Volyn, 1925

From left to right:

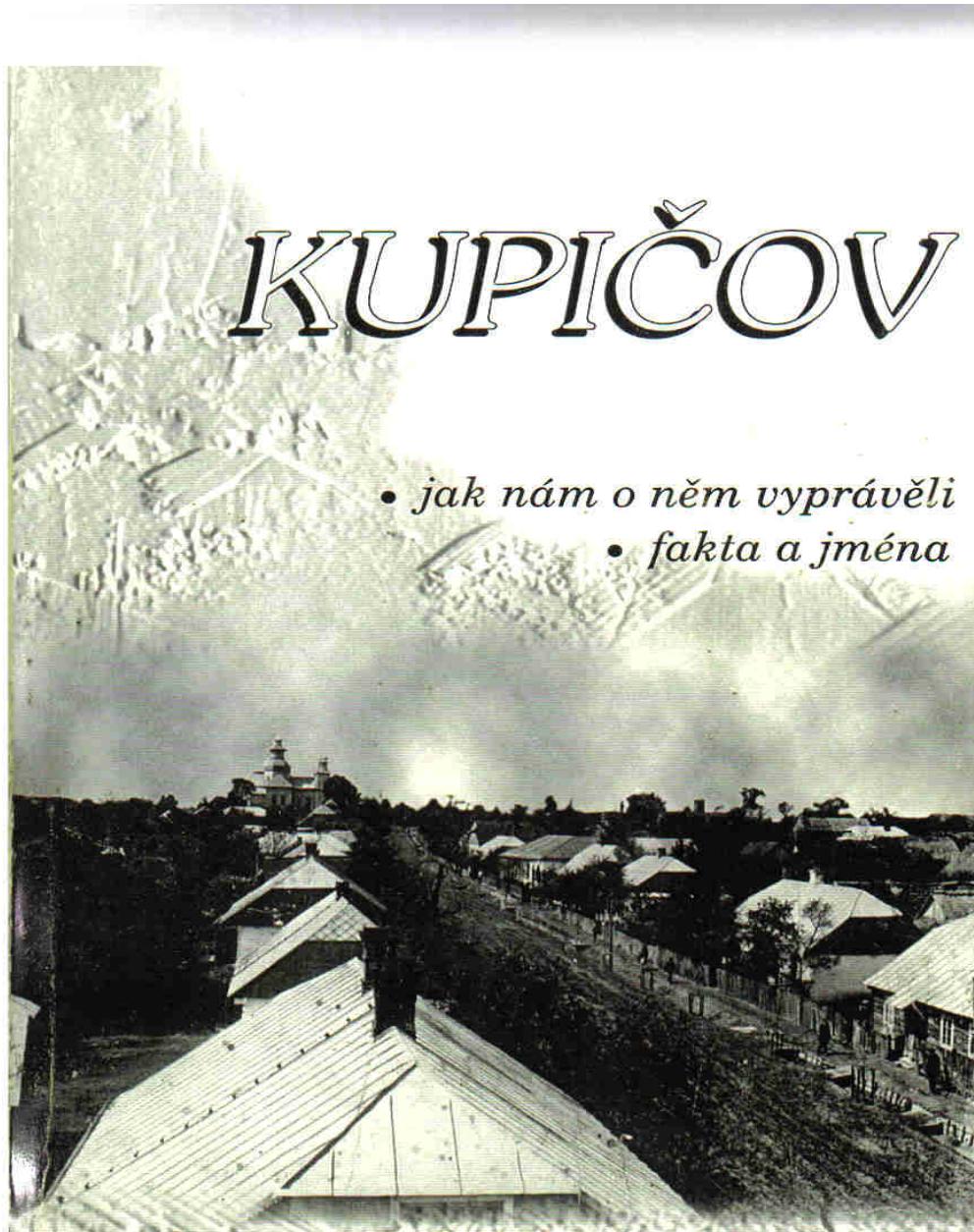
1, Roza	5. Mania
2. Shlomo	6. Mindl with Natan(three years old)
3. Bella	7. Grandfather Moshe with Mania's son Yone
4. Froim	8. Grandmother Hava with Samuel (one year old)



Bella Barengoltz with the kindergarten – purim in Vladimir Volynsky.

# KUPIČOV

- jak nám o něm vyprávěli
- fakta a jména



The village Kupichev, region of Kovel, Ukraine.

The **Shteiman** family



Malka Levin( Shteiman)



Tzvi ( Hershl) Shteiman)



Faivish Shteiman



Raizl Shteiman&husband Pinkhas Binder



The **Kutz** family come from Koretz, Volyn region, Poland



From left: Yonna Gordon, Hanna Gordon, Feigele(Zipora) Kutz (Gordon)

The **Shniter** (Szniter)family come from Lokachy(Lokacze), Volyn region,Poland



My Grandmother-Odle Szniter



From left: Mala & Nahum Shniter (Szniter), Pessel, Yankel Mendelson-1<sup>st</sup> husband,  
Mania Szniter (Eagel-2-nd husband)



From left: Alberto Szniter, Maria Szniter (Eagel), Mala Szniter, Sarita Szniter, Fernanda Glezer, Isaac Glezer. Photo from Brazil.



From left: Alberto Szniter, Fernanda Szniter, Maria(Mania) Szniter( Eagel)-Brazil.



From left: Ilan Szniter, Mala Szniter, Guilherme Glezer ( Brazil)



From left:1-st row Guilherm, Fernanda Glezer, Sarita Szniter  
2-nd row Ilan & Issac Glezer

The **Shek** family come from Lokachy(Lokacze), Volyn region



Bella with here son Ben Shek-celebrating 100 years ( Toronto)



From left: Shlomo Shek, Rita-Bella's sister, Alex Levin, Bella Shek. (Toronto)



Sim Shek with his wife Judy at the wedding  
(Montreal)

The **Tzeitlin** family (from my wife side) come from a little town Senno, Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk) region, Belarus. The first record settlement of Jews in Belarus was in 14<sup>th</sup> century. At that time Belarus was a region of Poland-Lithuania.

At the beginning of Soviet rule in Belorussia, Jews lived in relative harmony with the Russian society. The Jews of Belarus maintained Yiddish as their main language.



**Marina's paternal grandparents Ethel and Hershel**



**The Tzeitlyn Family in Senno ( Belarus)**

**From left to right:**

**1<sup>st</sup> row: Aaron, Riva, Riva's husband, Dora.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> row: Vera, unknown, grandmother – Basia(Dvoira), grandfather- Hershel.**

**3<sup>rd</sup> row: Mina, Stella, Genia.**



**From left: Aaron, Eugina, Mina, Vera Tzeitlyn(Moscow,October 14,1926)**



**From left: Tzeitlyn, (Rita, Issay(brother),Vera(sister),Ethel(Rita's mother).)**



David Tzeitlyn in the Russian Army (photo 1915)

The **Halpern** family come from Bialystok ( Belarus). From the beginning of the 1800's to the Holocaust, Bialystok was a prominent Jewish City. The Jewish share of the population for most of that period ranged between 50 and 75%. Among major cities of Poland Bialystok clearly had the highest percent of Jews and the largest number of synagogues per capita in Poland.



**KOPPEL AND BASSIA HALPERN**



**SAM HALPERN**

LERMAN		MARY
NOM DE FAMILLE - FAMILY NAME		EDITH SAM
HALPERN		DECEASED
NOM DU MARI		DECEASED NAME OF HUSBAND
143 ST JOSEPH BLVD WEST		MONTREAL
ADDRESS ACCORDING TO		1-10-06
43 YEARS		C.O. 1777
AGE / AGE		NATIONALITY
YES		CANADIAN JEWS
SUJET BRITANNIQUE BRITISH SUBJECT		BY NATURALIZATION AT MONTREAL
ELECTEUR ELECTOR		PAR NATURALISATION EN BY NATURALIZATION IN
TÉMOIN WITNESS		SIGNATURE
ASERMENTÉ DEVANT MOI, À MONTREAL SWEORN BEFORE ME, AT MONTREAL, THIS		1 OCTOBER 1938
No 1928 89848		CORPORATION MONTREAL H. G. Novick OFFICIER MOTORIZÉ - AUTHORIZED OFFICER

**MIRIAM LERMAN (HALPERN)**



**NORMAN HALPERN**



**GLORIA HALPERN**

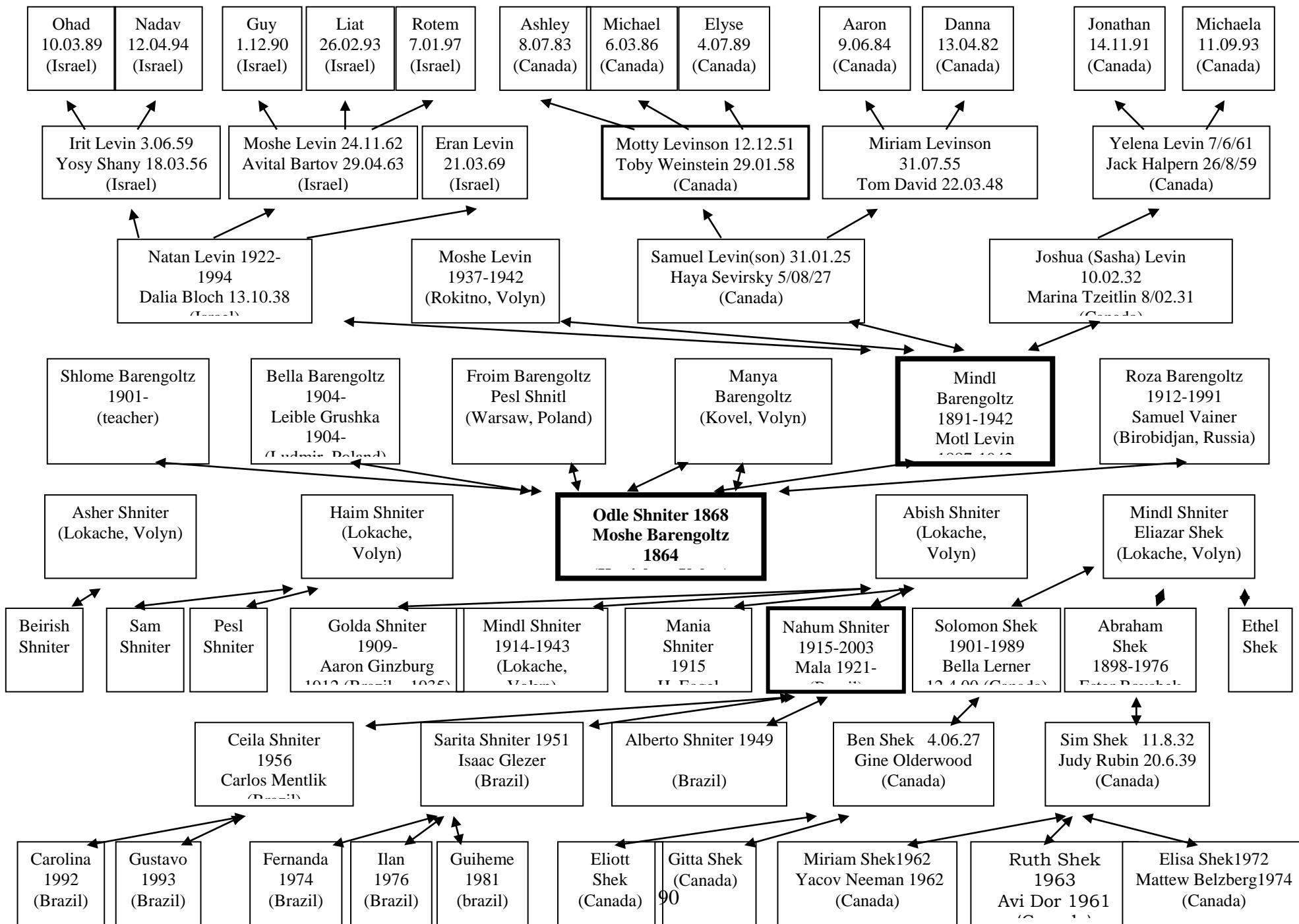


From left: Jack, Jonathan, Yelena, Michaela Halpern (Toronto)



From left: 1-st row: Marina, Michaela Halpern, Yelena, Alex(Joshua) Levin  
2-nd row: Jack & Jonathan Halpern

\*Sources (table ancestors)





My life's treasures: my grandchildren Jonathan and Michaela.



THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS  
WHO RISKED THEIR LIVES TO SAVE JEWS  
IN THE HAMLET OKOPY THE CATHOLIC PRIEST  
LUDWIK WRODARCHUK AND TEACHER FELICJA  
MASOJADA.



九

**W nieważymiejęciu iż w  
tejże nocy odkupienia**

# תעודת כבוד Dyplom Honorowy

NIEJESZCZĘ ZASWIADCZA SIE, ŻE RADA  
DŁ SPRAWIEDLIWICH WŚROD NARODÓW  
ŚWIATA PRZY INSTYTUCJI PAMIĘCI  
NARODOWEJ YAD VASHEM PO ZAPRZANIU  
SIE JE CZŁOCZNA DOKUMENTACJA  
POSTANOWIŁA NA POSIEDZENIU W  
DNIU 3 . VIII . 2000 r.  
ODZNACZYĆ

וחאת לתשורה שבישיבת  
עיסום ב אב תיש'ס  
החליטה הועדרת למצוון  
חסירוי אוותות הנעלם  
שלדר רשות הזכרון ידרשם  
על יסוד עדריות  
שהבחנו לפועל, לעת כבוד  
ויקר ל

# פליציה מסואודה — Felicja Masojada

MEDALEM SPROWADLIWYCH WŚRÓD  
NARODÓW ŚWIATA, W DOWÓD UZNANIA,  
ŻE Z NARAŻENIEM WŁASNEGO ŻYCIA  
RATOWAŁA ŻYDÓW PRZESŁADOWANYCH  
W LATACH OKUPACJI HITLEROWSKIEJ.  
IMIĘ JEJ UWIECZNIONE BĘDZIE NA  
HONOROWEJ TABLICY W PARKU SPRO-  
WADLIWYCH WŚRÓD NARODÓW ŚWIATA  
NA WIGÓRCU PAMIĘCI W JEROZOLIMIE.

על אשר בשנות השואה  
באיירופה שמה נפשה בפה  
להציג יהודים מרדפים  
עיר רודופיהם ולהעניק לה  
את הנדרלה לחשידי אוטות  
השלם.  
שפחה יונכה לעד על זה-  
כבוד בחורשות חסידי אומות  
העולם בדור השלישי

Jeruzolima, Izrael, dnia  
20 · IX · 2000 r.

Amy Sherald סא...  
בנימין רותם הזיכרן ית' זיכר  
W. VALENTIN "VAD VASHON"

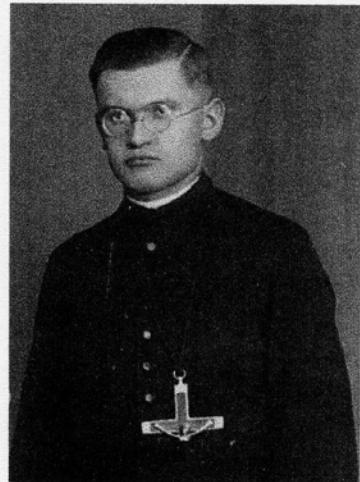
בשם הנבחרת ליגת חסידי אומות העולם  
THE HAGGADAH OF THE CHASIDIC LEAGUE



**YAD VASHEM – JEROZOLIMA**  
**„Sprawiedliwi wśród Narodów Świata”**



Felicia Masojada c. Michała  
Nr t. 8930



ks. Ludwik Wrodaarczyk s. Karola  
Nr t. 8930A

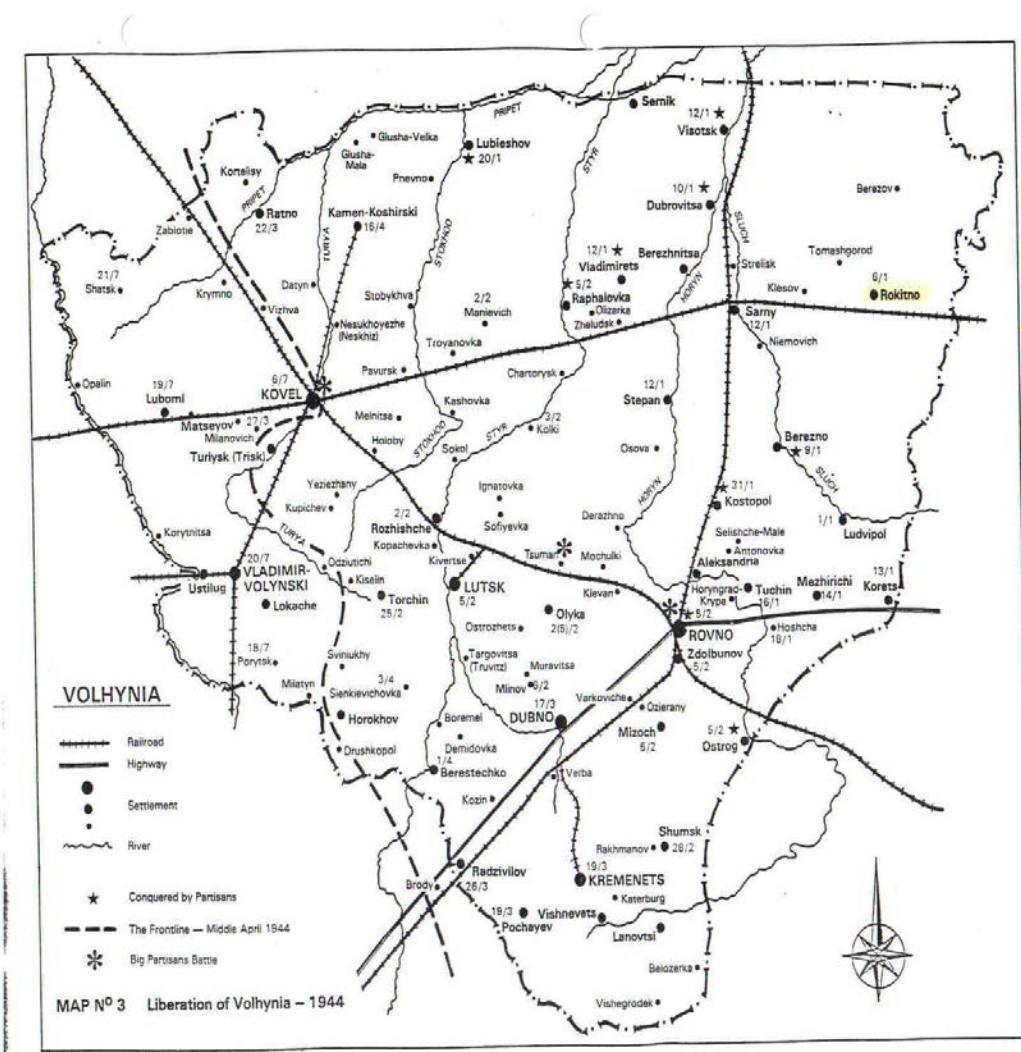
*Tytuły zostały nadane pośmiertnie 3.08.2000*



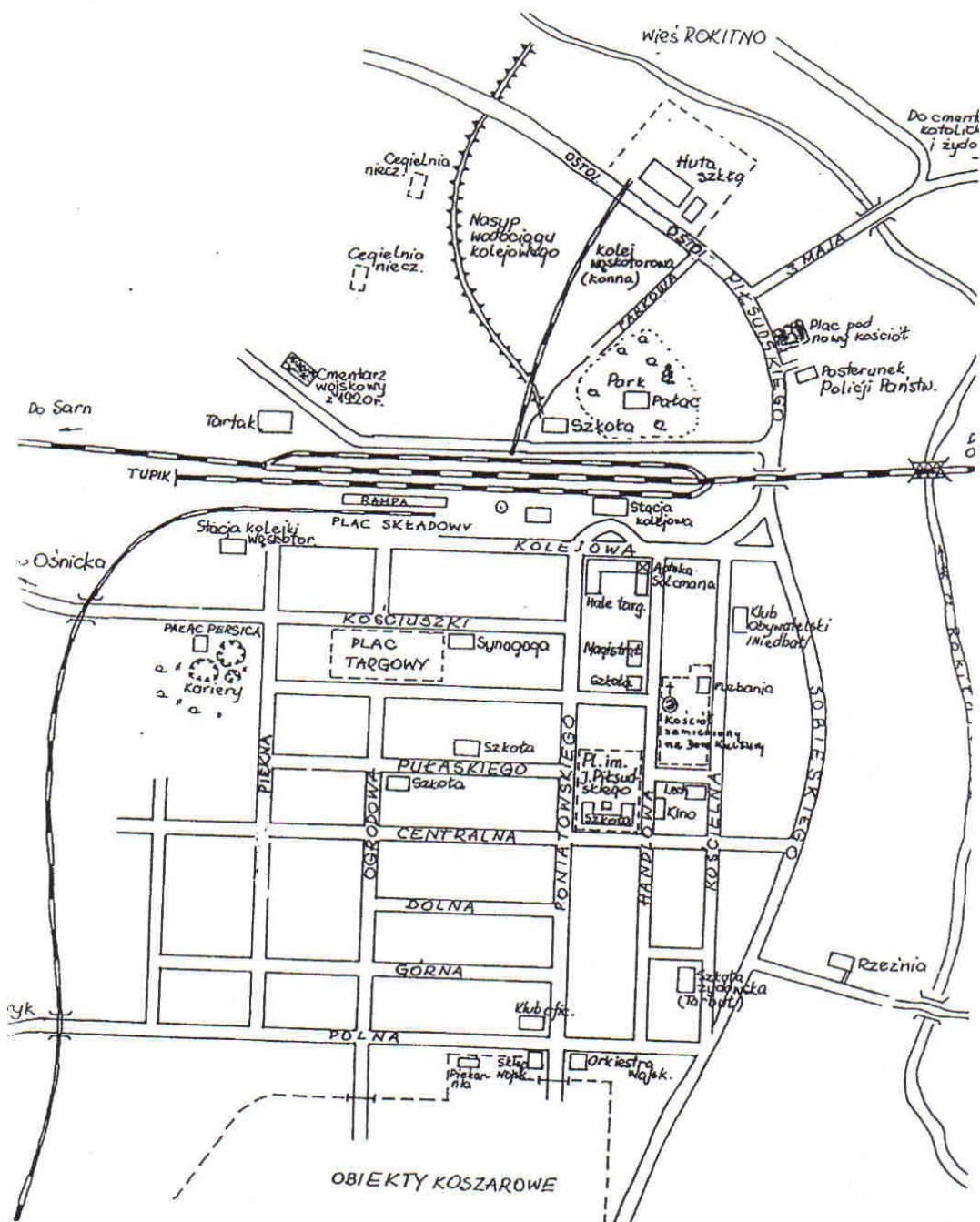
**March Of The Living - 2002**



\*Map of Rokitno, Volyn



## ROKITNO 1939





Reunion with Edmund Masajada, 2002 in Warsaw



\* Street Pilsutskego (Stalin)



Our street Pilsutskego before the WWII



Location of our house in Rokitno- photo 2006



Rokitno cemetery: Monument for Jews killed by the Nazis in 1942



One of the mass graves near Sarny.  
In this place on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1942, 18 000 people of this region were killed  
(written in Ukrainian).

Members of my family included in that number.  
Our visit in 1995.



Visit Rokitno region in 1995 a group of survivors and families.

### **\*Virtual Cemetery**

Souls were present at the old Jewish Cemetery in Rokitno. A small committee were established in Israel by survivors from Rokitno. They started researching, fundraising and arranging restoration of the old Cemetery involving the local people. A metal wall was constructed around the area and an iron gates were installed at the entrance. The visitors from Canada, Israel, Germany spend a few days and they visited the Cemetery. We stood transfixed with emotion during the memorial service at the place where a once was a thriving Jewish community buried its dead. I felt like my great grandparents were there. I felt their presence. To us, it is important that they are remembered.



Visit to the cemetery in Rokitno, 1995



Cemetery in Rokitno, 1995

## INDEX

1. Nagibin, Uriy - Russian writer
2. Wiesel, Eli - Holocaust survivor, Nobel Peace Prize winner
3. Suvorov Military School - Named after famous Russian field marshal Alexander Suvorov who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is considered a prestigious school for future military officers in Russia.
4. Martin Borman - Son of Reichsleiter, most barbarian fascist.
5. Shtetl - little town in Eastern Europe, inhabited by Jews, either exclusively or in its majority.
6. Beitar (Betar) - the youth section of the right - wing Zionist Revisionist movement led by Vladimir (Zeev) Jabotinsky.
7. Halutzim - is a Hebrew word meaning "pioneers".
8. Rosenberg - Jew from Belgium.
9. Konstantinovsk - city in Ukraine.
10. Zavadski - Polish general.
11. Leschinski-relative of general Zavadski
12. Polesje - woodland region in Poland.
13. Soltzman, Yakov – pharmacist.
14. Aniszcuk, Borys - doctor.
15. Heder (Cheder) - Jewish preschool.
16. Mitzkevich, Adam - Polish poet (1798 - 1855).
17. The Nazi – Soviet Pact (Hitler, Ribbentrop, Stalin, Molotov) - August 23, 1939
18. Straz Ogniova (fire dept.- Komendant-Gogolewski).
19. Tarbut – Jewish community day school.
20. Shulman -
21. Gitelman -
22. Golubovich -
23. Pilsudski -
24. Haichkes - tenants, rented part of our house
25. Kupichev (Kupiczow)- village of Kovel region, Volyn.
26. Kovel (Kovel) - city of Volyn
27. Koretz (Korzec) - city of Volyn
28. Lokach (Lokacze) - city of Volyn
29. Blitzkrieg - on 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1939, German forces invaded Poland, Blitzkrieg was now put into practice.
30. Golod, Avraham - 1<sup>st</sup> inhabitant of Rokitno killed by the Nazis.
31. Sokolovski – Oberwachmeister - Polish Volksdeutsch from Silesia.
32. Koch, Erich - governor of the Ukraine.
33. Dich (Ditsch) - area agricultural expert – Kreislandwirt.
34. Gilfpolizei- Ukrainian supplementary police force.
35. Judenrat - Jewish councils, established by Nazis, the Jewish led organization were to govern their own ghetto communities.

36. Gaidamak & Nemirov massacres 1932 - p.32 from book about Russian Judaism 1917 - 1967, NY 1968 (in Russian).
37. Tod Organization - Dr. Fritz Todt, largest single employer of labour in Germany (page 46, Martin Gilbert WWII).
38. Eisenberg, Mindl -
39. Wrodarchuk, Ludwik - Catholic priest.
40. Ksendz - Catholic priest in Polish.
41. Masojada, Felicia - Polish schoolteacher.
42. Bronislaw, Janik - Polish colonel
43. Zhur, Leon -
44. Polischuk, Wictor -
45. Karpilowka - village in Ukraine.
46. KGB - Russian intelligence services (Lubynka Headquaters).
47. NKVD - Soviet Secret Police.
48. Einsatzgruppen - mobile Nazi death squads.
49. Einicait – Yiddish news paper in USSR.
50. Zemlianka – dugout.

#### MAPS

1. Volyn region -
2. Rokitno 1939 in polish.
3. The military road of the 13 Armee from 1941-1945.

#### ARTICLES

1. A British white paper (Germany #2, 1939, Toronto “The Musson book company LTD. 1940.”)
2. Documents concerning German – Polish Relations, Sept.3, 1939, London.
3. Jewish Partisans and fighters of Volyn (in their memory), 1998.
4. We are from the Voronezh Suvorov school, Voronezh 2003 (in Russian)
5. “Sarny and Rokitno in the Holocaust” - a case study of two Townships in Volyn (Volhynia) by Yehuda Bauer.

#### BOOKS

1. Spector Shmuel. The Holocaust of Volhynian Jews 1941 – 1944, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and Federation of Volhynian Jews, 1990.
2. Silverman, Peter, David Smuschkowitz and Peter Smuszkowicz. “From Victims to Victors”, Toronto Canadian Society for Yad Vashem, 1992.
3. Gilbert Martin. “Second World War” 1989, Staddrt Publishing Co. Ltd.
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5. Vaclaw Kytl, Miloslava Zakova, “Obrazky z Kupichova”,2000.
6. Solomon, Michael. “Magadan” Chateau books limited, Montreal.

7. Gladstone, Bill. "Roots and Remembrance, Explorations in Jewish Genealogy", New York 1971.
8. Bronislaw, Janik. "There Were Three Of Them" (in Polish).
9. Zhur, Leon. "My Volynski Epos".
10. Polischuk, Wiktor. "Bitter Truth", Toronto, Warsaw, Kiev. 1995.